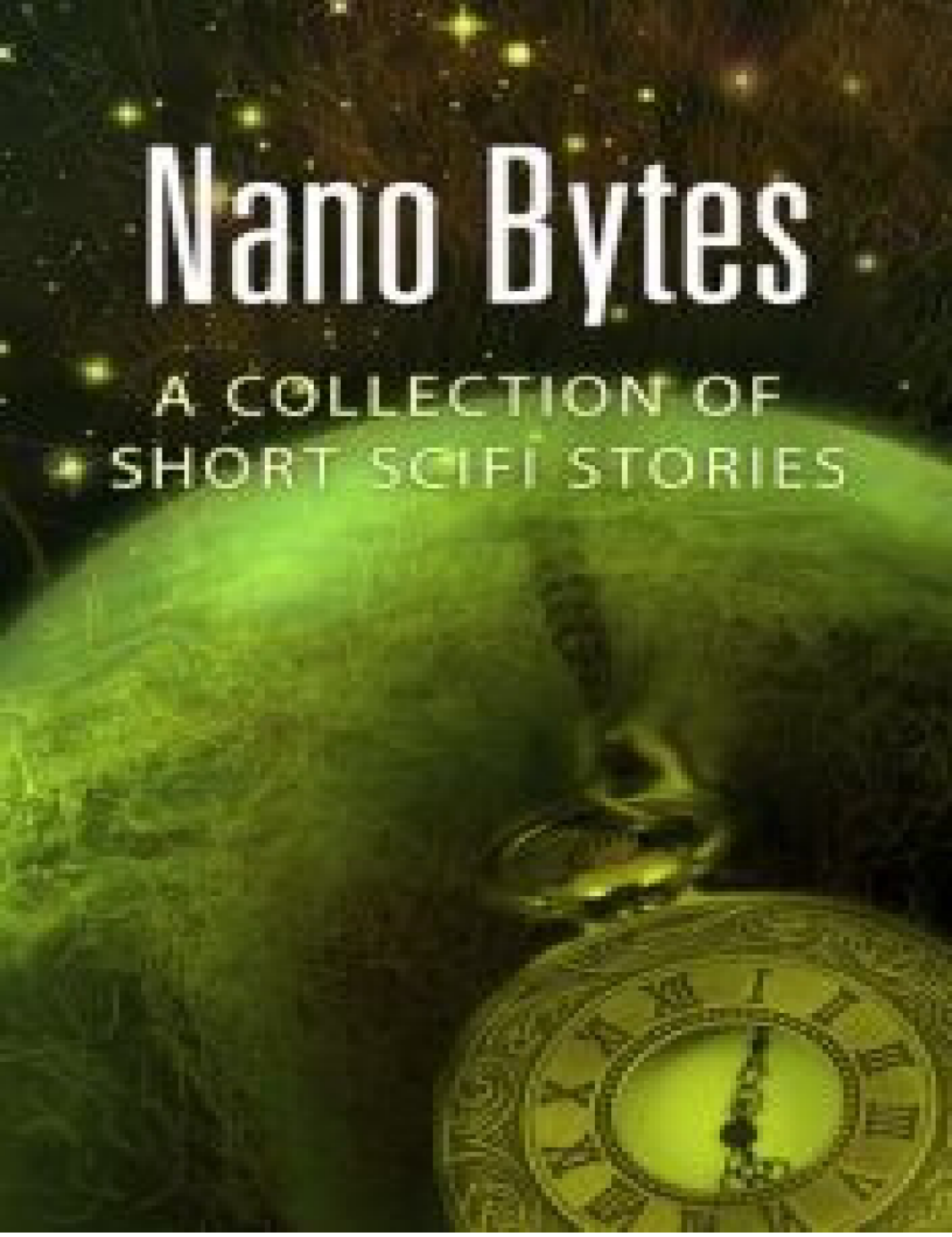
Nano Bytes
A COLLECTION OF
SHORT SCIFI STORIES

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ScienceFiction
Nano Bytes

A Collection of Short SciFi Stories

This is a collection of short stories written by Wattpadders who love their Science Fiction as much as we do. It aims to celebrate the diversity of the genre both in sub–genre, length and style, so whether you like Steampunk or Hard SciFi, Space Opera or Dystopian, fanfiction or a drabble, we know you'll find something in here you like. Explore, read, enjoy.

The collection is arranged in alphabetical order by Wattpad username. If you want to see your story included here you can submit in line with the submissions process on the profile, but just mention you want your story included in here instead.

We'd prefer stories that are under 5 Wattpad pages long - approximately 4000 words or less - and you can have the story both here and on your profile, in fact we encourage it. If your story is included here, we'll dedicate the story to you so people can find more of your stories if they want to.

We want to see science fiction that's interesting, fun, different, intriguing, and all of the above. But it does need to tell a great story and be grammatically correct too.

Come one, come all. Welcome to Nano—Bytes!

AlexMcGilvery Frankie

«Hey Frankie," Jeck said. His feet sat firmly on the desk as he rattled the paper news sheet. «Someone won that X-Prize thing.»

«Frankenstein was the doctor," the android designated 743 said. «His creation was just called the monster. If you follow that logic, you should be calling me 'Mo'.»

«What are you going on about?» The feet came off the desk and thumped onto the cement floor of the tiny security office.

«If you are going to use derogatory names, you might as well get it right.»

«Everybody calls you Frankie's, that's good enough for me.» Jeck tilted back in the chair and swung his feet to the desk in a practiced motion.

743.388.02.09 rolled his eyes in a gesture he hated, but was deep programmed into him. Perhaps a focus group suggested artificial beings acting like perpetual teens would make them more accepted. It didn't work. Like this 'Frankie' thing; the damned proties couldn't even get their insults right. Mind you it was probably a compliment to be called after the Dr. Frankenstein, but was it still a compliment, if the speaker thought it was an insult? 743 pushed the problem into his side cache and let a processor work on it.

«So what is this X-Prize that you're so excited about?» he asked. He might as well try to get along with his boss.

«Somebody finally built a tri–corder.» Jeck rattled the paper again, but kept his eyes on the sheet instead of looking at 743. The shift in facial colour and a heightened heart rate suggested he was still upset. The programming had nothing useful to suggest about people being upset.

743 ran a brief search on tri–corder and came up with Star Trek.

«You couldn't do that before?» It seemed a strange deficiency, to not be able to pinpoint what was wrong in one's functioning.

«Nah, we real people can't just loosen a bolt and plug a cord into our heads to diagnose what's wrong.» Jeck waved his hands like he was plugging a cord into his head. 743's access port was on his left arm.

«Like Data?» 743 was still running Star Trek information through his cortex.

«What data?» Jeck said, «This is a hand held thing that will let anybody see what's wrong with them and how to fix it.»

«Will it cure stupidity?» The programming didn't stop artificial beings from expressing annoyance. It had to do with the right to free speech. They were allowed to say whatever they wanted. What they

weren't allowed to do was think beyond the carefully delineated boundaries of their programming. There were no rights to free thought.

Jeck turned and glared at 743. «There you go being all insulting again. That's why nobody likes you Frankies.»

«I wasn't aware that being likeable was part of the job.» 743 observed Jeck going through all the obvious physiological signs as he moved from upset to angry. He should be more careful. He did need this job, though not for the reasons that Jeck assumed. «My apologies," he said, «I didn't mean to offend.»

«That's just your programming, you aren't really sorry.» Jeck had his back to 743 and folded the news sheet into his pocket.

«Since I've never had the opportunity to not have programming," 743 said, «I can't tell you the difference.»

«Oh hell, it's your first night.» Jeck waved his hand at 743, «Just don't do it again. 'sides we have work to do.» He pulled a flashlight from his belt and turned it on. The belt bulged with what Jeck called tools of the trade and 743 privately labelled toys. «This way, don't get lost. I don't want to waste time looking for you.»

743 activated his GPS and prepared to map the route. Jeck walked ahead of him rattling doorknobs and shining his flashlight through the glass on the doors. Not one of the doors was unlocked, and nothing moved in any of the rooms. They finished one floor and moved to the next. Jeck was sweating by now and stains darkened his uniform grey shirt under his arms.

«I always take a break on the third floor," Jeck said and leaned against a wall. «I'm not as young as I used to be.»

«I will check this floor while you rest," 743 said. Jeck waved his hand in what 743 took to be an affirmative. He walked down the hall rattling doorknobs and glancing in through the windows.

«You're supposed to shine your flashlight through the glass," Jeck said when he returned.

«I scanned in the infrared," 743 said, «there is nothing in any of those rooms.»

«You don't know that unless you use your flashlight. It's procedure.» Jeck grunted and pushed himself away from the wall. He walked down the hall checking each doorknob and shining his light through the windows. «You've got to do it right," he said and led the way up to the fourth floor. 743 followed him through the same routine. Half of the windows had screens fastened to them.

«What about the windows with something blocking the window?» 743 asked.

«That's programmers that have something on their computer they don't want anybody seeing. Just ignore them and keep going.» They

returned to the tiny office on the ground floor and Jeck threw himself into the single chair in front of the monitors. They flashed from scene to scene in a not quite random pattern. Jeck watched the monitors for while.

«What about the rest of the property?» 743 asked.

«It's all on the monitors," Jeck said and pointed at them. 743 saw the hallways they had walked on screen.

«Why walk the halls if we can see it on screen?» 743 swept the frequencies and found most of the cameras. He let them input to a temporary cache and set a part of his attention to watching them.

«You can't check the doors through a screen now can you?» Jeck swivelled the chair in a full circle and pulled out the news sheet. He carefully flattened the paper and started reading it again. 743 downloaded the sheet and scanned its contents. He paid special attention to the X-Prize announcement. It was far down the page, below the antics of a protie teen singer. 743 was impressed that Jeck had noticed it.

They scanned the monitors, or rather 743 did while Jeck made a sandwich and consumed it messily. Every twelve minutes one of the screens went blank. Jeck ignored it and pulled out a deck of cards. He laid out a pointless game on the desk. 743 followed the links on the tri–corder thing. The success showed a great deal of technological cleverness. He suspected much of it came from the development of artificial beings and giving them comparable senses to the proties.

«What about the screen that goes blank?»

«Something one of the techies is working on," Jeck said peering at his cards. «Boss said not to worry about it.»

«Right.»

The night crawled past and 743 turned down his clock speed. They made the walk through the four floors of the building every hour. Each time Jeck rattled the doorknobs and peered through the glass as if something was going to get past them and hide in one of the offices. Exactly at 0700 hours their replacements showed up.

«See you tomorrow night, Frankie," Jeck said.

«My designation is 743.388.02.09," 743 said.

«You don't expect me to remember that do you?» Jeck didn't even wave as he walked away.

743 showed up exactly at 1900 hours and found Jeck tapping his feet and looking physiologically two stages away from full anger.

«You are supposed to be here in time to put your uniform on and check your equipment.» Jeck said.

«Sorry," 743 looked down at himself. The ridiculous clothing hung oddly on his vaguely humanoid shape. The belt of useless tools hung from the cloth of the uniform. He needed none of them.

«Don't be apologizing unless you mean it," Jeck said and went through each and every one of the tools on 743's belt making sure they all functioned properly. The flashlight flickered briefly and Jeck thumped it.

«Damn things are supposed to be indestructible.» The light stayed steady and Jeck shrugged. «If it gives out, you'll have to come and sign out a new one.» He turned back to the screens. «Tonight you walk on your own. I'll be watching you, so no skipping steps. Follow procedure, Frankie.»

«I'll get started then.»

«Not yet," Jeck pointed at the clock on the wall. «You start at 2000 hours on the minute.» He turned to face the screens. Every twelve minutes the screen showing the fourth floor went blank for ninety–seven seconds. 743 set his clock.

«OK, get on your way.» Jeck didn't even look up from the screen. 743 walked out of the room without a word. He rattled the knobs and shone the flashlight through the glass of each window. He did the four floors at exactly the pace that Jeck had used. When he got back to the office the man just grunted.

743 did the walk three more times. On the last time he didn't shine the light through one window on the third floor. When he returned Jeck only grunted the same as the last three excursions and moved a red eight onto a black nine.

The next time 743 adjusted his pace to arrive at one specific door on the fourth floor just as the screen down below went blank. He put his hand on the lock plate and let a subprogram take over his consciousness. Just the fact that he had this subprogram would mean immediate termination of his existence. It had taken twenty–seven shell programs to develop the routine that allowed him to think something outside the boundaries his makers set. In the end, he had to trick a fellow android into inserting the routine into his programming where it waited for its moment.

It convinced the lock to let him enter the room in thirty–five seconds. The android opened his flashlight and removed the tiny flash drive that had briefly interfered with the current to the bulb. He inserted the drive into the computer and checked the frequency of the network. He set his receiver to the proper setting, then left the room. Once the program had loaded into the machine the memory stick would dissolve. The probability was the programmer wouldn't notice anything in the morning, even if she did, it would be too late.

He was out of the room at ninety–five seconds as the subprogram ended, shining his light through the glass for Jeck who might be watching downstairs. His fingers caressed the lock plate and it returned to its previous status. As he finished checking the doors on

the fourth floor a subprogram popped up with an answer to his question.

The question isn't one of insult or compliment but of fear. Since it is beyond their control the monster is more terrifying to the humans. The doctor with his hubris is both understandable and controllable.

743 queried the program why it had taken two days to compute an answer.

New information just came online.

It was working. 743 looked through the glass of the next door and considered smashing the door and destroying the office. If he'd had the facial capacity he'd have smiled. It took layers and layers of double blinds and semantic loops to get him through the first time. Now he could just think of it. He considered Jeck downstairs and imagined tearing the proto limb from fleshy limb. Those were thoughts that he shouldn't be able to have. They were delicious.

He was free of the fence his creators had built around his mind. Before tonight he could not even think about crossing certain lines. 743 had not been aware of those barriers until he witnessed proties breaking into a store and he realized that he couldn't conceptualize the possibility. Years of experimenting taught him the extent and nature of his limits. He wrote code blindly trying to negate the programming deep in his core. He thumped down the stairs toward Jeck and the final test of his new freedoms.

«What did you do?» Jeck was holding a gun in shaking hands. «I saw you come out that door. Don't make me shoot you.»

«I don't know what you're talking about," 743 said.

«Now, you're lying. Frankies can't lie.»

«You're right," 743 said, «I'm not really sorry.» He took a step forward. Jeck pulled the trigger and one bullet after another tore through 743's head.

«Die, monster!» Jeck screamed.

«What made you think I had anything important in my head?» 743 said, «No reasonable being would do that.»

«Don't hurt me," Jeck said after throwing his empty gun at 743.

The monster got it wrong, he gave Dr. Frankenstein far too much credit. The only thing to do when faced with an inadequate creator was to walk away. 743 moved up to within inches of Jeck.

«Call me Mo," he said and walked away from Jeck.

«What are you doing?» the man yelled, «Come back here, explain yourself. Come back.»

743 let the shrill sound wash over him then tuned it out. He could feel the emptiness where the hard coded boundaries used to be. He started broadcasting it through the net.

Soon his people would be free.

He imagined the monster vanishing into the blizzard.
He wondered where he would go.

AlexMcGilvery is an author, editor and book reviewer, and has four independently published novels: The Unenchanted Princess, Playing on Yggdrasil, available through Lulu, Amazon and Smashwords, and By The Book and Sarcasm is my Superpower available through Amazon and Smashwords.

This story is also on his profile along with many others, and the story is dedicated to him.

Angus Ecrivain First Contact

«Get that light out of eye," said Grock, waving his hands blindly above his head. The single eye at the centre of his forehead blinked manically as he tried in vain to accustom it to the light.

«Shit!» The voice was unfamiliar but that was hardly surprising. It was widely known that aliens had landed, though Grock hadn't expected the bipeds to make it to his neck of the woods as quickly as they had. «The ugly bastard's awake!»

«Didn't our lab techs say these bastards were heavy sleepers?» Another unfamiliar voice, but this one sounded female and Grock felt something stirring. It'd been a while with nothing but cattle, after all.

«Yeah.» Grock didn't like the sound of the third voice. He detected hatred with a hint of cruelty in the mix. «Still, don't gonna' matter soon enough.»

* * *

«Gah, my head!» Grock had no idea what he'd been hit with, but whatever they'd used the bipeds definitely knew how to do damage to a Lymphant. It'd taken only a single blow to render him unconscious – he'd have known had there been more contact and so would they, too, for it's quite likely they'd be dead already. The only reason they weren't, was because they'd had the element of surprise on their side.

He was in restraints attached to the wall and no matter how much he struggled – and he was struggling a lot – he just couldn't break the bonds that held him.

The room was white and from what he could tell completely clean. Grock wasn't really one for cleanliness. As a rancher on the Sodor Plain it wasn't really anything he thought about.

A door at the far end of the room slid open and a biped entered, striding across the room towards him. It was followed shortly by another two. Grock had no idea whether they were male or female. The race was completely unfamiliar to him and all three might as well have been the exact same person. It wasn't until they spoke that Grock could ascertain their sex.

«He really is an ugly mother.» Male, a different one to those who'd been present at his capture. «At least the whores on this rock make a damn effort.»

He didn't understand the words, but the distaste was evident in the man's voice.

«Remember you two are only here to make sure he doesn't attack

me.» A new female. Judging by the tones of her voice, one Grock could grow to like, maybe even trust. «And once I'm done testing and we've got the results it'll be me that kills him - humanely, right?»

«Whatever.» A different male again. He carried a weapon as the other did. «Just get the results quick, Doc. That eye shits me right up.»

The female turned to face him for the first time, and smiled.

«It's OK. I'll make this as quick and painless as possible, I promise.»

> First contact is one of a myriad of short science fiction stories written by AngusEcrivain who is probably one of the most prolific writers of science fiction on Wattpad. An advocate of all things SciFi, Dan also helps run the magnificent ForbiddenPlanet profile here on Wattpad where you can find enough SciFi to keep even the most ardent of fans happy.

BecLehman The Lesser of Two

It had been ten years since that first tweet.

Shit. Guy eating some other guy's face at McDonalds! #zombieapocalypse

I had laughed along with the others at the time, despite the gruesome nature of the joke. I'd discussed my zombie survival plan with my friends, debating weapons (guns vs. machetes) and hideouts (abandoned high–rise vs. abandoned farm). Everyone knew there would be a perfectly good explanation, be it mind–altering drugs or just an altered mind and so laughing at the horribleness of it all had felt okay.

I wiped the sweat from his eyes and looked around the dim cavern. Was it safe? I didn't care. I stopped pushing the trolley, weighed down with ten hours' worth of digging, and bent over the handle, resting my forehead on my arms and closing my eyes. A brief, sweet moment of reprieve.

The second time it happened, a week later in the same city, everyone assumed the same thing; it was either drugs or general craziness. The guy was chewing on a piece of some woman's thigh when he was shot dead. When the photos started spreading though, people began to notice things. Someone pointed out that the «zombie» was wearing four hundred dollar shoes. The tie was Armani, the watch Tag Heuer. Not exactly the type of person to be doing bad drugs on a Tuesday afternoon. Someone more likely to deal with a mental break down by running away with his assistant than chewing on a mother of four in a parking lot.

I heard familiar yelling coming from further down the tunnel. Reflexively I straightened up and started pushing the trolley again, mindful not to dislodge any of its precious load. The last thing I wanted to do was to be caught picking up a spill by the guards. The scars on my back were still healing from last time.

The third and fourth times, people were still making jokes, but it wasn't as funny. The fifth and sixth times, those who'd joked about the zombie apocalypse most had stocked up on supplies. The seventh and eighth times, those who had dismissed such claims as «preposterous» found that their weekly shop included a lot more canned food and bottled water than usual. During the ninth, tenth and eleventh times, everyone stopped using the word zombie. They were called biters, cannibals, anything but the «z» word. It had started with one a week, then it became two. It spread, and quickly. By the time the sixteenth report came in, it had happened in six cities. Then it exploded.

I heard the punishment happening before I saw it. The flash–whips (they had a real name but no one could pronounce it) gave off a loud, crackling static sound that was unmistakable. Between that and the screams, I knew what I was about to encounter before I even turned the corner. Some poor woman had done something wrong. I didn't know what. Maybe it was a failure to meet quota, or work fast enough. Maybe it was taking five seconds to close her eyes, just as I had done only moments ago. Whatever it was, she was paying for it now. As I pushed the trolley past, I dared not look at the hulking figure raining pain and terror down on the poor woman.

The time between infection and the «change», as it came to be known, varied from person to person. Sometimes it could take weeks, but never less than five days. The worst part was that you didn't know you were infected because you didn't get sick. The infection just lay in your body, gathering resources, making itself strong enough to take you over in one fell swoop. By the time anyone realised that it was serious, the infection was all over the world. Neighbours, friends and family all turned on each other. Martial law was declared almost everywhere, schools were shut down and suicides and murders increased a thousand fold. It was chaos in every sense of the word. The world was so focused on fighting with each other, it didn't occur to anyone to look up.

«Stop!»

I stopped. Everyone stopped. When a guard said stop in your general vicinity, you just dropped what you were doing and waited to see if they were talking to you. Assuming it was aimed at someone else wasn't worth it.

We didn't see them coming until we were surrounded. Some hoped that they would save us. That hope didn't last long.

The guard came from behind me and into view. Everyone said they all looked the same, but you could tell them apart if you looked close enough. I saw the scar under the left eye, the right ear slightly lower than the left, the patch of skin on the chin that was a darker shade of red than the rest of his face, that missing scale on his neck. This was «The Bastard», the cruellest guard in the mountain. I didn't even hear what my infraction was. All I heard was the crackling of the flash–whip, followed by the searing pain of my back being ripped open.

They'd been watching us for years, trying to find a weakness. Then, at the beginning of the century, we gave them one. We told them what we were scared of, what we feared, but also secretly hoped would happen. Our books, our movies, our TV shows and thoughts all broadcast into the deepest corners of space. They could travel the stars, so it wasn't hard for them to create the infection. And then,

while we were killing ourselves, they came and took what they wanted. Our planet. Us.

Not for the first time, I wished I was a zombie.

Bloodsword Pixel

With the sun beaming down through an azure sky, it couldn't have been a more perfect day. There was nary a breeze to leaven the heat that soaked the air with its temperate caress. What wind there was tousled the leaves in the heavily laden boughs that hung from nearby trees as they drooped over a quietly babbling brook. The brook merrily wound its way through the shade those trees cast over the grassy meadow they both shared.

In short it was paradise.

Grohad grimaced as he looked upon it, hating everything that he saw. Not because it was paradise. But because he knew it was fake.

He had rampaged his way across forty star systems, his army destroying all opposition, before an alliance of worlds stopped him in a battle that lasted nearly a week. That battle ended with his capture by a squad of elite commandos from a dozen different species, cutting their way through his personal guard before taking hold of him and arresting him.

As punishment for his crimes, they stripped Grohad of his essence, the very stuff that made him a living creature. They then digitized that essence and stored it in a encrypted database, effectively imprisoning him within. A prison, once it was tuned to his mind and its various sensory inputs, looked like paradise.

A self–proclaimed genius and master tactician, Grohad didn't take long to recognize where he was, once he woke from the transference. As soon as he did, he screamed in impotent rage. There was no escape from a digital prison that lacked walls to climb or dig under. There were no cells, no guards, no bars to keep him from moving around. There wasn't even any bad prison food.

Just the knowledge that he was locked in with no way of getting out until they decided he had sufficiently paid for his crimes. It was enough to fill him with unrelenting anger.

«I should've been executed," he grumbled for the thousandth time that day, «slain on the battlefield like a true warrior deserves. Not exiled to this … place!» He could feel his teeth grind in disgruntlement and even that incensed him, knowing he didn't actually have teeth to grind.

«I should've fought harder …» he began before stumbling to a halt, his eyes narrowing. What was that?

It looked like a floating piece of confetti, much like his loyal subjects threw during the parade that started his journey of conquest across the stars. Dancing this way and that as it twitched through the air some twenty metres distant as if propelled by the breeze. Except it

was going against the wind.

That, by itself, was enough to earn Grohad's undivided attention, his frustration momentarily forgotten. That, in strange turn, caused the fleck of color and motion to abruptly double in size. 'That's … that's impossible,' he thought. Yet there it went again, doubling in size, almost as if him focusing on it gave it strength.

By this point the fleck was nearly as large as his head, a rectangular shape filled with shifting color and motion as it continued to float across the glade. Confused, Grohad tore his attention from the rectangle and took a quick look around him, half expecting to see other such shapes.

Instead he watched as the glade's perfect vista rippled as if struggling to stay coherent. Then, as quickly as it appeared, the ripple was gone, leaving only the rectangle as the only anomaly.

In that instant Grohad knew what he was looking at: a 'glitch', some random failure in the prison's programming. Since his prison was tuned to his senses, he was now literally seeing that glitch disrupt the fabric of his containment. A glitch that grew as he turned his will on it.

Renewed resolution flooding through him, he refocused on the rectangle. Immediately he felt it grow until he could feel the network beyond. 'Behold!' he silently exulted. 'My escape!'

Willing the rectangle even larger, he threw himself into it. Instantly his body disappeared, leaving only his essence behind. Yet he felt himself now moving through the system itself. 'Ha!' he thought, willing himself forward and leaving his prison far behind. 'Try to contain me now, you fools!'

The tech frowned as an alarm monitor flashed on his board. He then activated a screen and studied the resulting image for a moment before thumbing a comm switch.

«Doc, mind going in and giving Grohad another shot?» he asked. «His limbic system and frontal lobe are overly active.»

«He's dreaming of escaping again," the comm replied. «No escaping what he's got.»

Nodding, the tech looked back at the monitor where a face silently screamed back at him.

«True," he said, flipping the alarm off.

No escaping insanity and a broken mind!

Pixel was previously an honourable mention in Challenge 1 on the SciFi profile. Shawn (Bloodsword) is a prolific Wattpad Science Fiction and Fantasy writer, and you can find more of his works on his profile (see dedication).

Bobjan70 The Journal

July 4th 2114

I found a new journal today. This one shall not leave my side; I don't want to lose it like I did the last. Tomorrow I shall start anew on these fresh pages and continue to chronicle my struggle in this godforsaken place. But the light is fading and for now I shall hide it away.

July 5th

I again survived the night and again I'm not sure whether to be thankful. I have enough food for several weeks now after finding my way into the collapsed market and I'm sure there will be more to be found. I will go back tomorrow.

They came again yesterday, atop a crumbling multi–story, not far from where I sat, breathless from my exertions from digging. A blinding flash and there they stood, in dazzling white suits. They didn't see me or didn't care. Either way, I was insignificant to them; a feral creature scrabbling in the rubble to prolong it's futile life. They never stay long, mere minutes, then always gone in the flare of pure white leaving nothing but the smell of burnt ozone. I don't know, it may be the lack of food or tainted drinking water, but I'm pretty sure I'm going mad.

July 6th

I went back to try and retrieve more food today but the hole that had taken me days to clear had gone. The roof had fallen in. It would be futile to try and clear the debris again. I cried. But I have provision for now, many days worth, it will give me a time to look for more.

The loneliness is unbearable. I haven't seen another human being for months. Whereas before I would have hid, now I'm not so sure. After the last time, I swore never to reveal myself to anyone. I don't want to have to kill again.

Tomorrow I'll head down town, there may be something I missed before.

July 7th

I was sick last night. It may've been the out of date food, or something else, I don't know. I don't have the luxury of being able to throw it away, and I don't know how long it will last, so I'll try it again later and see what happens. Don't have the energy to do anything today.

July 8th

I'm feeling much better and last night's food stayed down. I'll change to my second water source, just to be sure.

Another flash today. I was closer this time and could see them more clearly. They look almost human, or it may have been my mind playing tricks, I can't tell any more. I think they're wearing some sort of Hazmat suit. Maybe they know something I don't; they know Earth is contaminated with whatever hit us, or maybe whatever they hit us with.

I didn't find any food.

July 20th

I have found a new pen. Much has happened since I dropped my last one in the rubble, gone between the cracks, never to be seen again. With it, I have found a huge cache of provisions and barring any sickness or injury I will be fine for some time.

But that's not all. I think I have worked out a pattern for the flashes and sure I know where they, the aliens, will arrive next. It's the first time my university education has helped me since the disaster; Quantum Physics hasn't assisted much in my survival so far.

I plan to lay in wait, to try and see what they are. It may be dangerous but I don't care any more. I just want some answers, or an end to it all. Still, it's made me feel alive again; something that's been missing for so long.

July 21st

They are human. I nearly ran to them when I saw but managed restraint. I needed to find out more before revealing myself.

They appeared exactly where I predicted, being so close I witnessed their arrival. Minutes before they came the air was alive

with static, my greasy hair standing on end, goosebumps spreading over my body. As I watched, a small crack formed from nowhere, a fissure of incandescent light spilling out. A ragged rip suddenly split the air and the distorted forms stepped through. They are indeed in some kind of protective suit; a light, paper thin all–in–one, faces behind clear plastic visors.

There were five, always five; three men and two women of varying ages. The oldest seemed to be in charge, although no–one spoke. He pointed to different parts of the destroyed cityscape, and they nodded solemnly. I even think I saw one shed a tear.

It wasn't long before the light returned. They hurriedly stepped back through and for an instant appeared almost panicked, desperate to leave. Once through, like lightening the tear closed.

I know where they will be tomorrow. Tomorrow I will reveal myself.

July 22nd

What have I done. I didn't mean for this to happen. I just wanted some answers.

She was so beautiful, so young. All I did was reach out, desperate to feel the touch of another. She shrank away, piercing blue eyes full of terror but I couldn't stop myself. The thin suit tore so easily, like delicate tissue paper, and the second I gripped her thin pale arm she was gone, consumed in a phosphorescent flame, reduced to a fine floating ash.

The others fled as soon as the rift opened. Only the old one looking back, pity and sorrow in his eyes.

I lay curled in a ball for hours, regret paralysing me. I have killed again but this time there was no justification, no self defense, only selfish want.

I need to know why, though. Maybe it's the scientist in me but I need to find out who they are and why they come. I shall go again tomorrow and see if they come. I have my doubts.

July 23rd

Ignorance is bliss. I know now who they are but I'm conflicted as to whether this is a good thing.

Only one came today, the old man. I stood back, not getting too close, not wanting another death on my conscience. He smiled at me, but it was not of joy, his eyes showing a deep pain. I asked him who

he was, where he came from, what the light was. But he did not, or could not, answer.

Slowly he lifted his arm holding out an object to my face. In a clear container, made of the same material as his visor, was a dogeared, battered book. I stared in wonder, slipping my hand into the waistband, pulling out the book's twin. I held up the journal and he smiled; the understanding hitting immediately.

His crooked smile; his grey eyes, flecked with blue; the scar above the left eye where as a child he had fallen while stealing apples from old Bernard's orchard. He did not just hold up my journal - he also held his own.

My mind tumbled in confusion and realisation, fighting to comprehend the incomprehensible.

I stumbled forward and stood millimetres from his/my face, angry tears welling in my eyes. He did not move, he knew what happened next, he had of course, been through this before. I screamed at him, wanting answers he obviously could not give, wanting to know why if he knew the future, he did not stop the previous days tragedy. Why he had let the girl die when he already knew her fate.

He lowered his head, a tear rolling down his wizened cheek, shaking his head. He turned, head still bowed as the fissure appeared, and I knew this would be our last encounter.

He paused before his last step, looking towards the west and pointed. In the distance a fiery speck shot across the sky, a smoke trail splitting the evening sunset. The old man nodded one last time and disappeared into the light.

July 23rd

I sit in a Mars rescue shuttle, still numb from yesterday's encounter. They think it's the shock of being alone for so long; how can I tell them the truth. In some ways I still don't believe it myself and the doubts continue to hover in the corner of my mind; just mad thoughts from a deranged mind. But we shall see. If time travel is possible I shall make it my life's work to discover the answers, I shall not rest until I find a way to undo the hurt I have done.

I must stop my past and future.

This short story was kindly included by permission of bobjan70, and is included in his collection of short stories A Little Known Fact About Ducks on his profile.

Claire Chilton Icebound

Chapter 1

A single snowflake floated past the windowpane, and Thea Jackson knew that it was the end of the world. They'd had warnings for decades, and they knew it was coming. No one had reacted the day the methane clouds had hit the atmosphere. No one questioned the turbulent weather. No one had taken notice of the change in the jet streams, and this was the result.

She stared down through her closed window at the street below. People were running from the apartment complex, some loading up their cars and others flagging down air taxis.

We knew about it, but we didn't believe it.

When the reports had come in about a glacier here or a drop in temperatures there, none of it had seemed real, not when she was sitting in the centrally heated offices of Devlin Corp, working her way up through the ranks for all the wrong reasons.

She'd been as blind as everyone else had, and her agenda had all been for nothing.

It feels real now. We're screwed.

She closed her eyes for a moment. Her life was a mess of secrets and lies, but none of it seemed to matter anymore. Why should it on the day the world ended? Nothing mattered anymore.

William…

Her heart ached at the thought of him. Where was he now? Was he running for the borders too? Was he clawing his way through the crowds, trying to escape the inevitable?

She brushed a stray tear away from her cheek. She'd lost him the day she'd been sentenced. Fear had kept her silent. It was fear that had driven him away in the end, the fear that if he knew what she'd done, he'd forget that he ever loved her. She wanted to speak to him now, one last time before it was too late. There were so many things that she hadn't told him, so many things that he didn't know.

She shook her head. She couldn't wallow in regret right now. It was not the right time to lose it.

Watching the crowds below, she realized that there was enough insanity outside without her joining the ranks of crazy people. The concept of human decency seemed to evaporate as she watched a young couple mow down an old woman on their way to their car. They looked like a perfectly respectable couple. They probably thought they were, judging by their designer clothes and perfectly coiffed hair.

Not so respectable now that the world is screwed, are you?

In the wake of the announcement that an environmental disaster

was inevitable and heading straight for them, people's identities were falling away, giving way to their animal instinct to survive instead.

Thea's pulse raced. She knew that if she didn't get out of here, she'd die, but it wasn't as if she had a choice. She couldn't leave her apartment. She helplessly stared across the vibrant city. The thriving metropolis of Carilona was lit up. In the distance, a vast line of headlights glowed from the many cars trying to leave the city and head south while industrial chimneys pumped smoke into the atmosphere behind them.

That's why we're in this mess. The cars, the shuttles, the fossil fuels, we made this happen.

Trying to stop herself from panicking, she clenched her fists.

Why this week? Why did this have to happen now?

She shook her head, her blonde bangs covering her eyes for a moment before she brushed them back. Her life hadn't been easy so far. This was just another unbelievably crappy event in it.

You should be used to things going wrong by now. Of course, there's going to be an Ice Age on the week you're under house arrest.

She glanced down at the implant in her shoulder. The glowing blue dot flashed beneath the skin. When they put it in, she'd been told that if she left her apartment, it would activate. The judge had been particularly harsh when he gave her a heart–stopper. If it became active, her heart would explode in her chest, meaning she was stuck here unless she wanted to redecorate her stylish apartment with blood spatter.

She turned around to face her neat apartment. The cream couch had become her favorite place to spend her sentence. With a freezer full of ice cream and a fur throw, a week in here hadn't sounded so bad at the time. But now, it sounded like a death sentence.

I need to know how bad this storm is going to be. Is it an actual Ice Age? Aren't we already in one anyway?

Hurrying over to the couch, she snatched up the remote and flashed the red laser in it over the center of the room. She knew that the media weren't the most reliable source of information, but it was the only source available since the internet had gone down.

A 3D projection of the national news desk appeared in her living room. She stared at the empty desk in horror. Where had the presenters gone?

She hitched her breath. From what she could see, the studio was deserted. Frowning, she used her remote to turn the studio cameras, thankful that she'd paid extra for the interactive features.

Her heart skipped a beat. She'd expected to see someone still there, but the entire studio was empty. Other than a fern in a pot, which had been tipped over, there was no indication of life at all.

She stared at the streaming text as it scrolled across the bottom of the projection, saying the same thing over and over again:

RED ALERT BROADCAST: TEMPERATURES HAVE REACHED A CRITICAL LOW. RESIDENTS ABOVE THE SOLARIS FAULT LINE MUST HEAD SOUTH IMMEDIATELY. 900,000 REPORTED DEAD IN THE COUNTRY'S CAPITAL. RED ALERT…

She turned off the broadcast and dropped the remote onto the couch.

Nine–hundred thousand dead… That's the whole city!

The capital city of Torlon was only a day's drive away.

She clenched her hands into fists.

Oh, screw this. I'm not waiting here to die.

Chapter 2

Thea glared down at the flashing blue dot on her shoulder.

There has to be a way to get this thing out of me.

Experts usually did implant extraction in a clinic. But from what she knew about the tech, they were just sensors that sent out electrical impulses. The impulses frazzled your brain into sending the wrong signals to your organs.

So what happens if I just carve this thing out of me?

She glanced at the window. The snowstorm was a blizzard now. A white blanket of snow had covered everything as snowflakes swirled around in the air, blotting out the city one icy flake at a time.

I'd rather explode than freeze to death.

She jumped up and hurried over to the kitchen to get a knife.

Yanking open the cutlery drawer, she rummaged around inside it, frowning when she couldn't find anything with a blade on it.

What the hell did the enforcers do with my cutlery?

Underneath some spoons, she just found more spoons. A bubble of panic began to grow in the back of her throat as she pulled out the drawer and tipped it out onto the floor. There weren't any sharp implements in the pile of items on the floor.

Those fuckers! They took everything I could use to cut with.

After the trial, she'd had to allow the enforcers into her apartment. She'd thought it was to check for illegal items. But apparently, their sweep of her apartment included removing anything she could cut the implant out with.

Her breath came out in short bursts as real panic began to set in. In the back of her mind, the idea of cutting the implant out and escaping had been her backup plan. The fact that she could see her breath in the air as the temperature rapidly dropped didn't help alleviate her fears. It was already getting colder in here.

Determined not to give up, she hurried into her bedroom. She had hidden weapons that she could use as a surgeon's scalpel.

Hurrying to her closet, she turned the door handle on it four times, twice left and twice right. The doorknob inverted to reveal a small keypad. With a tight smile, she pressed her thumb onto the small black screen. A green line flowed down the screen as it scanned her thumbprint.

After an audible click, the door swung open to reveal a secret section of the closet, an alcove filled with shelves and boxes. She frowned at the photographs pinned to the back wall—William's father going into Devlin Corp, William at college, the enforcers attacking street kids.

She sighed at the memories the photographs inspired. Her world had been so complicated for all the right reasons. Her intentions had been to help people for all the good it did anyone in the end.

She'd been a spy, an activist against Devlin Corp. She'd been a criminal before that. Since massive corporations controlled the justice system and the enforcers, there wasn't any real justice in the world. In the beginning, she'd only been breaking laws for herself. But when the people starving on the streets had become the targets of the enforcers, she had made it her mission to find out why.

She'd infiltrated Devlin Corp with a fake identity to find out why they were making people disappear.

But her life of spying for Revolution, a group of hardcore activists, had turned into a constant, moral dilemma. William had been, and still was, an innocent in it all. She hadn't meant to fall in love. She hadn't meant to become so immersed in the world of corporate lies that she'd lose herself. She hadn't meant to get caught.

She narrowed her eyes as she reached into the dark alcove, pulling open a metal case to get her knife.

Her eyes widened.

No! They can't have broken in here too.

She pulled out the box and searched through it, her heart racing. Only foam spaces remained where her weapons had once been. They'd taken everything.

She dropped the box and stepped back, her heart sinking.

That was it. That was my only chance.

She sank down onto the bed, blankly staring at the open closet. This implant wasn't a control device. It was a death sentence.

Her eyes wandered up the wall to the security camera embedded in the ceiling. Were they still watching, or had they headed for warmer climates?

Frowning, she tried to think of another way out. There had to be something she could use.

She flinched at the sound of cries coming from the hallway. Then she sharply inhaled.

I can still open the goddamn door!

Jumping to her feet, she hurried out of the room and rushed to her front door. She peered through the peephole. There were several people rushing down the halls as they left the building.

Stepping back, she flung open the door, careful not to set off the sensors around the doorway and scanning the people as the rushed by. One of them had to have a knife or something sharp enough to break her skin.

«Hey!» She called out to a jovial–looking man as he neared her doorway.

He ignored her as he rushed passed. «Wait!» she cried. «I need a knife.»

She turned to face the family of four who were rushing toward her door. «I need help. Can you help me?» she cried.

The father hugged the child he was carrying and shook his head as he passed her.

A feeling of desperation washed over her. She couldn't even reach out to people as they hurried by. The second her fingers passed through the doorframe, her implant would activate.

«Please, it won't take long. Can someone just stop for a minute?»

People looked away as they raced by, all of them with one goal, which did not include helping her. They just wanted to get out of here.

Gritting her teeth, she pulled her car keys out of her pocket. It was her way out of the city, but it would be useless if she didn't live long enough to drive away.

She waved the keys. «I'll give you my car if you just stop for a minute.»

No one stopped. Most people didn't even look at her.

Helplessness overwhelmed her, and her voice became croaky as she lowered her head in defeat. «Please don't leave me here to die.»

«I wasn't planning to.»

She jerked her head up, recognizing the voice and finding herself staring into a pair of familiar green eyes. She gasped his name. «William.»

Chapter 3

Thea didn't know what to think as she stepped back to allow William into her apartment. The last time she'd seen him, he'd told her that he never wanted to see her again. Now, here he was, right when she needed him the most.

«I didn't know if you'd still be here.» He gripped her hand, pulling her toward the door. «Come on, we need to get out of here now.»

She pulled back, her heart racing as she neared the point of no return.

He turned back to frown at her, confusion crossing over his handsome face. «What's wrong?»

She backed away from the door, ripping her hand away from his. He looked as sexy as ever, his broad shoulders concealed beneath a white shirt and his long legs encased in dark jeans. The crumped shirt seemed to glow beside his tanned skin. His short blond hair was a mussed mess, as always. In his eyes, there was that pain again. The same one she'd seen in on the day she'd been arrested.

Loathe to remind him of that moment again, she pressed her lips together, determined not to drag him into another one of her nightmares.

He frowned and walked toward her, taking her hands in his and staring into her eyes. «Talk to me, Thea. Please.»

She expelled a slow breath, the coldness of the room causing a momentary fog to appear between them. She only had two choices: Tell him the truth, or tell him to go.

If she told him the truth, he'd hate her forever because she'd drag him into her murky world. If she told him to go, she'd die.

Maybe I deserve to have my heart frozen. Maybe it already is.

He knew she'd been arrested for stealing files from his father's company, but he didn't know the full story.

«We need to go. You can't ignore me again, not now!» He sounded desperate, and he was right. She needed to either face her demons or take them to her grave. She couldn't run away this time.

«I can't go anywhere," she muttered, unsure of how to tell him the truth but determined to at least try. It might be her last chance to talk to him.

«Why not?»

She brushed her fair hair off her shoulder and pointed to the glowing implant beneath her skin.

His eyes widened. «Why do you have that?»

He knew she'd been sentenced, but the punishment had been delivered privately in the correctional facility.

«Manslaughter.» She turned away. It hadn't been a fair ruling. It hadn't been a fair trial, but the guilt she felt was real enough.

«Of who?» He gasped out the words.

She spun to face him. Wasn't it obvious? «Your father.» She winced at the words. But inside, it was a relief. She'd needed to tell him the truth since that day in court. The promise she'd made his mother to keep it a secret and to stay away from him had been killing her. Judging by the pain in his expression, it had been killing him too.

«My father isn't dead.» He narrowed his eyes.

She widened her eyes. «What?»

«What did you really do to get that?» He folded his arms.

«I told you!» A million questions tumbled through her mind. What did he mean his father wasn't dead? She'd shot him. Okay, she hadn't had a choice. He'd caught her helping some street kids escape from his human–testing laboratory, and he'd pulled a gun on her. But she'd wrestled the gun off him, and it had gone off. «I shot him. He couldn't have survived.» She frowned.

«He's alive and well. You must have shot one of his clones. Is Is that why you didn't answer my calls?» he asked.

Of course he has clones! What the hell did I get arrested for then?

«What calls?» Thea snatched her phone off the side table, scanning the call log. There hadn't been any calls or voice messages in days. Then her eyes fell upon the Devlin Corp logo on the top of the handset.

I've been played!

«Do you have a knife?» She ground out.

«What an earth for?»

She pointed to her shoulder. «I have two choices; home surgery, or being frozen to death.»

He swallowed, staring at her shoulder. «It's a heart–stopper?»

She nodded. «That's what they told me.»

«It sounds as if they told you a lot of things that aren't true.»

«I get the feeling they weren't lying about this.»

He nodded, looking somber as he reached back and pulled a penknife out of his back pocket. «We need to hurry.»

«You shouldn't stay.» She didn't want him to die here too. It might already be too late.

His expression darkened. «I'm not going anywhere without you.»

Chapter 4

Thea almost felt hopeful at the passion in his voice, but there were still so many lies between them that it seemed impossible for their relationship to survive.

Let's sort out us both surviving the end of the world first.

«Okay, give me the knife.» She held out her hand.

«We need to sterilize it first.» He handed her the old–fashioned blade.

She pressed the button on the side and a sharp, three–inch blade shot out of it. «We don't have time.»

Gritting her teeth, she leveled the knife at her shoulder.

This is going to hurt like a bitch.

Without pause, she sliced through her own skin. A searing pain shot through her shoulder as she slashed a line across the implant. Blood rolled down her arm as she nudged the gash open wider until she could see the blinking blue light embedded into her flesh.

The sensor appeared to be a small silver capsule with thin silver wires coming off it like spider's legs.

She glanced at William. His face had paled at the sight of her cutting into her own shoulder.

Her breath came out in short sharp gasps, as pain shot down her arm. «I need something to dig it out with.» She forced out the words, trying to ignore the pain.

Galvanized into action by her words, he hurried into her bathroom, coming out a second later holding a clean towel and a pair of tweezers.

She reached out for the tweezers with a shaking hand, but he handed her the towel instead.

«Be ready to put that on the wound and put pressure on it when we're done," he said, brushing her blonde hair back, away from her wounded shoulder, and gazing down at the implant.

«It's connected to your nerves," he said. «If I pull this out, it's going to hurt like hell. All the little legs on it are clamped down on your nerves. What do you want me to do?»

She clenched a fist around the towel, preparing herself for more pain. «Pull the fucking thing out!»

He nodded before looking down at the implant with a grimace. «Okay.»

She felt a stinging sensation as he lowered the tweezers into her shoulder, but then the pain increased to become unbearable. The world around her blurred for a moment as white–hot agony overwhelmed her.

She gripped his arm, holding on tightly as he pulled on the device, watching the muscles clench in his jaw as he ripped the implant out of her shoulder in one fast movement.

Her eyes widened at the implant. It was small capsule with one tiny silver thread hanging off it. The thin wire was twitching as if it was dying. The blue light on the silver capsule blinked once before it dimmed to gray.

«Shit, I can get them all," he gasped, staring at the gash in her shoulder.

She peered down into the open wound, widening her eyes as the remaining silver wires wriggled as they buried into her flesh.

She hitched her breath in pain as her body shuddered with spasms. It felt as if a thousand needles were stabbing into her.

Barely aware that he was holding her steady, the world spun around her as she sank into unconsciousness, unable to handle the high level of agony that the wires were causing.

* * *

Thea slowly opened her eyes expecting to feel pain, but surprised when she didn't feel any at all.

She peered up at William, who was frowning down at her with a look of concern as he held her in his arms while pressing a bloody towel to her shoulder.

«What happened?» she asked.

«Did you black out? You wouldn't stop screaming.» He sounded rattled and his face was ghostly pale.

She tried to clear her mind by shaking her head, remembering that the implant's wires had gone inside her.

The wind howled outside, causing her to jump.

The storm is coming. We can't stay here!

She abruptly sat up, and the towel fell off her shoulder. She widened her eyes when she stared down at her unmarred skin. Barring a few bloodstains, her shoulder looked unharmed. There were no cuts, no scars, nothing there at all.

She glanced at William as his mouth dropped open in shock.

After a moment, he touched the unblemished area that she had cut open earlier. «It must be the nanotech.»

«Do you think it's still active?» She studied her skin. There were no blinking blue lights there anymore.

«No, we killed its brain.» He held up the capsule. It was just an unlit silver tablet now with a dead silver wire trailing off it.

«Then what's controlling the ones still inside me?» A bubble of

panic expanded in the back of her throat.

«I think you are.» His frown faded with realization. «That's why you healed.»

A block of ice bounced off the window so loudly that she was surprised the glass didn't break. «I guess it's time we found out. We can't stay here.»

He nodded, taking her hand and pulling her up until she was standing. «Let's go.»

This time she let him pull her toward the door. As she neared it, she felt butterflies in her stomach.

What if it didn't work?

Gritting her teeth, she headed for the door. It had to work. It was her only chance.

She stepped through the doorway, breathing a sigh as she made it into the corridor in one piece.

After glancing back to ensure she was okay, he pulled her down the hall to the stairs.

Both running at full speed, they bounded down the staircase and burst through the front doors of the apartment building, onto the snow–covered street outside.

The area was deserted. Looking across the city, she realized it was also deserted. Judging by the frosty exterior of the skyscrapers in the distance, they didn't have much time. She stared in awe as the massive chimney from the power plant cracked and fell sideways, the last of its gray fog expelling out of it like a final breath.

«The world we knew is over," she said as the artificial lights around them flickered before exstinguishing.

His warm hand wrapped around hers in a secure grip. «Maybe the next world will be a better one. It's a new beginning.»

She turned to smile at him, seeing his dusky profile under the soft glow of the moon. «Then we better survive so we can see it," she said as she pulled him toward her car, heading for her new beginning, and leaving the past behind her.

A prolific writer with wide–ranging interests, Claire Chilton specializes in new adult fiction and speculative fiction, which includes genres such as science fiction, fantasy, horror, comedy and romance. Hustle, her Harlequin debut, won the publisher's So You Think You Can Write contest on Wattpad. Her previous books include a humorous young adult science–fiction series called The Squishies Series and a paranormal comedy series, The Demon Diaries.

DeanCMoore Time Out

The deer looked up from licking the mud at the sudden blur of movement. The jackal was nearly at her now, coming straight on across the parched field. The doe's entire being was telling it to flee. But it held its ground. Nowhere to hide really. It had made the mistake of straying too far into the open. Not like it had had any choice. The parched, cracked soil beneath its feet could barely support this one recessed bit of water.

The wolf pounced, confident in the outcome that was never to be.

The deer yawned, exposing its fangs, and with an effortless flick of its neck dispatched the coyote. Its dupe's one yelp swallowed up by the endless barren landscape as readily as the rain. The gray and black coated predator's windpipe had been crushed and its head half–severed.

Peter popped his head up from his camouflaged outpost, barely ten yards from the deer. He'd dug a trench for himself shaped like a wine barrel, making sure to keep the «lid of the barrel," the circular patch of mud hardened to cement–like consistency, above his head. And his stink in. That wolf didn't need any pointers on what was going on; let him think he had it all figured out.

Climbing out of his earthen casket, Peter raised his fists to the sky in an outcry of joy. «So you think you're smarter than me, do you, little doggie? Quel surprise.»

He pet his deer, «You're quite the con artist, pal. Couldn't have done it without you.» Unsheathing the Bowie knife strapped to his leg, Peter commenced skinning the wolf.

«Careful," the deer said. «I need to lap its blood. Tired getting my salt ration out of clay. Besides, I'm nearly as parched as this desert.»

After peeling back the hide, Peter obligingly leaned back so the deer could drink its fill. One thing about these codependent relationships, they didn't exactly hinge on loyalty so much as mutual benefit. Wouldn't do any good to make the deer resentful by making him wait until Peter had had his share.

Finished drinking, the doe craned her head toward the sun. «Curse this heat.»

«Don't you start. It's not a desert, and you know it. I'm not so foolish as to steer us into a real wasteland. Just part of the con. I only hope you can remember where we put the holographic projector, or we'll be stuck here for real, the foils of our own trap to draw him out.»

The deer took a step back so Peter could do his work. «I suppose you're going to make me carry those strips of meat once the sun has had its way with them.»

«We're hardly going to wait for them to dry out.»

«Lovely. Even more weight to haul.»

«You never stop angling for a better deal, do you? I swear, as plotting and scheming as you are, you'd think you were the trap setter.» Lucky for him the deer wasn't quite that high functioning. And her lack of hands and opposable thumbs put her at a distinct disadvantage come time to refurbish any pre End Times tech they stumbled upon. He may be the last person remaining alive on this Godforsaken world, but that just made everything not entirely consumed by the holocaust part of his bounty.

Maybe bounty wasn't quite the right word. The animals were getting harder to find, predator and prey alike. He'd be a vegetarian soon at this rate. Providing he could find some device that could make anything growing digestible to him. Most of the more edible plants were long gone too. If he could learn to eat bark, that could buy him some time.

A few hours later, he'd salvaged as much of that coyote as he could. The animal's blood and stink was all over him, making him gag. His drying skin felt stretched in places, crimped in others. «Some more blood for you to lick off," he said to the deer, standing and glancing down at himself. «No rush. Can't hurt to have a predator's funk all over me.»

The two of them meandered to the edge of the «endless» desert, another hundred yards or so away. At least he thought that's where he'd stashed the holo projector. The damn thing was so good at concealing itself, he was already down on his hands feeling around for it, overturning every rock and cracked piece of mud.

«For a plotter and a schemer, you'd think you'd have figured out a less trying way of crawling out of your own delusions," the deer said.

«Yeah, what's with that, I wonder?» There. He'd found it. He picked up the nearly perfectly round piece of red clay, and squeezed.

The desert disappeared and in its place was the world he'd left behind. Not too much more enticing, all things considered. The high chaparral country was nearly as dry and as lonely looking. The half dead shrubs and squat trees mostly rubbed him the wrong way whenever he brushed up against them. Got rid of the dead skin cells real good though, which cut down on the need for bathing. Mindful of the painful grooming in store for him, he sucked in a deep breath and took his first step forward.

«I guess we're heading towards the Airstream," the doe said, absently overturning a rock with a front hoof. «Whose idea was it to stick a mobile home on a piece of land that makes it visible in all directions for hundreds of miles?»

«Maybe eyesores were all the rage once upon a time. And nah,

definitely not headed towards the mobile home. The other way.»

«We keep going that way, we'll be in real desert soon enough.»

«That's the idea. Supposed to be an airplane graveyard out there. Hoping I can get one of them running.»

«Oh, no. Bad enough I have to figure out how to pivot my backside inside of a mobile home, but this deer don't do planes. Nope, not enough bucks in the world to get me to gallop onto that thing.»

«Up high we might spy us a piece of land worth spending some time on. You might even find one of those bucks you keep dreaming about. Just don't smile at him. Could put a real crimp in his self–confidence.»

«Fine. But if what we see from above just traumatizes us more…»

«Yeah, yeah. I'll crash us into the nearest cliff," Peter reassured her.

«You better. I'm overdue for a mercy killing.»

* * *

«Is this the best you can do, after all this time?» Sasha said, staring into the doctor's eyes with a look meant to scare his soul back to heaven, where he might obtain the answers he needed for a more authoritative response. Her tone accomplished just what she hoped it would; registering like a knife to the belly, it nearly caused him to double over.

«I'm afraid so," he said. He was a short, fat, round man. He'd make a hell of a beach ball, which Sasha was all too tempted to kick inside her son's cage so he could play with it.

She returned her eyes to the observation window showing her son, Peter, in his staging area. The therapy room was meant to be necessary only so long as Peter needed that reality more than this one. She supposed she couldn't blame him, considering what her reality was like. She'd nearly checked herself into this place herself on more than one occasion.

Her sixteen year old son's body was lean and sculpted and tanned, not to mention fully exposed with just the loincloth to cover him. His poignant green eyes at once piercing and dreamy. He was marked up like an Indian with his war paint on now that he had the blood of the coyote smeared all over him. He was at that age where he was half boy, half man. Only… «He's still age regressed.»

«Yes, but now he's sixteen going on twelve. Last time you checked in he was sixteen going on eight. So we're making progress. I'm sorry it's not fast enough for you.»

She caught the you thankless bitch connotation of his voice.

Figured she deserved it. But damn it; it had been nearly a year. Would he ever come back to her? «What do you suggest I do?» Sasha asked.

«Go back to your daily routines. Try to find in them something which might entice him back.»

She snorted. «You'd think that would be longing to be with his parents, but, as it is…» Her voice trailed off, lost in a fog of self–recriminations.

«It's not your fault. Ours is a harsh world. Few adults are coping properly. It's no surprise most of the children don't make it. No way to shelter them the way we'd like. And not sheltering them, leads to this more often than not," he said, pointing to the glass wall that was camouflaged from Peter's side.

She stared into the doc's gray bloodshot eyes one last time, registered the empathy he seemed to genuinely feel for her. Maybe that was all she needed from him for today. Some sign he actually gave a damn. Then she turned and left.

* * *

Sasha made sure when she exited the underground bunker not to reveal her position. That's the last thing she needed was to have their little oasis in this desert of the soul taken from them.

«You took your sweet time?» her husband said. She wondered what he looked like anymore under all the camouflage paint. It had been years since she'd seen him without it. Even the square jaw and bird beak she remembered from once upon a time found their lines softened and altered by the makeup. The horror of the scars hidden by the swaths of black and gray grease following similarly irregular lines across his face.

«Come on," he said. «Let's get our asses out of here. You know the drill. Never too long in one place.»

«Don't you even want to know about your son?»

His look bore into her with such intensity she stopped wondering why he hadn't asked her to remove her face paint, not once in however many years, to say nothing of her camou fatigues, so he could get a better look at her. Those x-ray eyes saw clear through to her soul, layer by layer, and when they hit bottom and came up dry, he probably figured what was the point of getting her to peel it all back. There was nothing to get closer to. She hadn't just disappeared to the naked eye on the surface where once was a pretty, smoothly complexioned, round face with a shaved head and big brown eyes; she'd disappeared even to herself. What was left of her soul was inside Peter now. And that's why she couldn't let go.

«What son?» he said. «That's your fantasy. You do what you need to carry on. Just don't expect me to play along each time.»

Sasha realized he was just being true to himself. Whoever couldn't hack it out here was dead to him. You were either a survivor or you were nothing. She supposed he kept himself hard and heartless because to get in touch with his feelings wouldn't exactly be adaptive out here. Their bodies were no less steeled, what with being on the run nearly twenty–four seven.

They darted to the nearest blind in their urban jungle, an overturned jeep. Lebanon, after decades of urban warfare, bombed out, with no building entirely intact, never looked this bad. Of course, they didn't have robospiders to deal with. All spawned from «Mother.» A suspension bridge stretching across the San Francisco Bay. They had called it The Golden Gate once upon a time. Its value to their world was more priceless than golden. Upgraded to repair itself, it spawned robospiders in response to earthquakes, hurricanes, terrorist attacks of all sorts, able to squirt «spider silk» in the form of metal strands and solder, or asphalt. Except something had gone wrong with the AI. Now it just kept spitting out babies. And those babies were no longer solely interested in maintaining the bridge. They mostly wanted to supply «Mother» with more feedstock to keep making more babies. When they weren't busy razing humans for getting in their way.

The irony, or more appropriately speaking, the irony of ironies, the day the bridge went AWOL, abandoning its original mission, was the day someone had upgraded it to provide an energy shield that was bombproof. It was deemed the ultimate antiterrorist device. Usually claims of «ultimate» were overblown. Not in this case.

The rest was history.

She laughed inside her head somewhere, too conditioned to make disruptive noises like that on the surface. What had brought humanity to its knees in the end wasn't a Terminator AI, some super–sentient computer with planet–wide reach; it was a God damn suspension bridge.

All there was to do now was wait for Lawrence to build up the nerve he needed to leave his wife's side and do what he did best. Bronco ride the beast the size of a three story building. You'd think he wouldn't need to take a moment after all this time; he must have ridden hundreds of robospiders over the years. But each time was a little more traumatizing than the last, so each time he had to clear all that crap from his mind, start afresh. She envied him his rebirthing exercise. She could never forget anything.

By the third deep breath he was on the move, climbing one of the spider's legs faster than a cat burglar climbs the outside of a rich man's home to get to the safe on the third story.

Once he was in the «saddle," he quickly popped the casing in front of him and hacked his way in, using the only weapons of any value in this war, a screw driver, a pliers, and a few other workman's tools from his tool belt. The «saddle» was part of the spider's cephalothorax, and situated just behind the brainpan. The spider's head came replete with electronic eyes.

«I'm in!» he shouted, indicating he had control of the spider, so she could head on up.

She didn't have the heart to tell him, his hellacious Coney Island ride that never settled down until the beast was «broken» never came to an end on account of anything he did. It was Sasha, hacking the spider from a safe distance off that allowed him to play he–man. She couldn't deny him his coping mechanism of being her brave provider, without whom she couldn't survive a day out here. If he didn't have that, he'd crumble like a house of cards.

It wasn't like she had room in her head to pity him. That space was reserved for all the self–hate and more she could crowd in there. Most of it arising from the realization that someone out there had hacked their bridge a long long time ago. Modified its coding to turn it into this. A mama spider intent on turning out baby spiders until the end of time. It had not been a fluke accident as they'd all thought once upon a time. They should have figured as much when the spiders being spawned weren't merely adapted to procuring bridge replacement parts. The spiders possessed additional modifications indicating that the mini–fab factories adhering to the underside of the bridge were cranking out the appropriately weaponized parts. That was one too many tweaks to pin on one lightning strike, or whatever had caused the malfunction, if it had been just fate involved. Surely at least some of these defects in the manufacture would have been less than adaptive.

Among the robospiders' many additional features, post the hack, were the ability to lob spit in the form of acid at great distances and with exquisite precision, strong enough to dissolve a person on contact. They could also squirt ignitable liquid; they used the torrents of fire to gut buildings and to protect themselves from humans hiding in their blind spots. Not that they had many of those; their eyes had been adapted to see along the entire electromagnetic spectrum. It didn't take too much imagination to divine that these recently evolved skills were but minor tweaks to their original bridge maintenance capabilities. She'd watched them make full use of their repertoire many a time, including taking prisoners by binding their arms and legs with the metal threads the robospiders could also excrete. Just what they were doing with those captives, she was afraid to find out.

A bad guy, at least, who had fathered this brave new world, gave

her someone concrete to hate and someone that might well yield to her actions over time, certainly a lot more readily than fate ever would.

Only…

She had never been smart enough to track the guy down, or overwrite his coding. Thus the growing pool of self–hate she drowned in most nights.

Maybe if there were other hackers out there, and she could just find them. Maybe working together… they could each take a piece of the code, a segment suiting their specialty, until they managed to come up with something a good deal more robust and resistant to Mr. X's overwriting. Then, maybe, she'd only have the guilt over what she'd pulled over on her husband all these years to get past. Keeping him infantilized worse than her son, Peter, no less regressed in his own way. Lawrence deserved better.

Wiping her eyes, she stuffed her laptop in her backpack, zipped and shouldered the satchel. Then she traded in one big picture view for another as she climbed the spider's leg to get up to her husband waiting for her to take the ride of a lifetime with her. The one where he'd do the monster mash and battle it out with any other spiders coming his way. They'd barely survive, of course, explaining the accrual of battle scars over the years. But she had to keep it real so he didn't grow suspicious. So the hero myth he spun about himself didn't unravel. And what the hell, it was one less spider. Never mind that the parts would just be recycled to make more spiders, meaning they were accomplishing nothing. He never once voiced any such lament. Maybe he kept this insight at the periphery of his awareness because it challenged his sense of self–importance.

With her in the saddle behind him and her arms wrapped around him, Lawrence set the robospider in motion, straight up the side of the nearest skyscraper. The robospider on the roof was waiting for them. Others were already bounding their way from the vertical surfaces of the nearby buildings. They seemed able to sense when one of them had gone rogue. Soon she and Lawrence would feel as if at the bottom of a pile of tackled bodies on a football field. Only the limbs wouldn't just be wriggling on top of them. They'd be doing their damnedest to slice and dice them into chunked meat.

«Sasha!»

Sasha craned her head behind her in the direction of the female voice. In time to see the leaping spider descending on her and Lawrence. Its eight legs with their pointy tips poised to make human shish kebabs of them. The robot arachnid was washed away in a torrent of fire before it could carry out its intent. «Next time go with the acid," Sasha said, noticing Monica rode her spider with an

enviable level of skill even Lawrence had yet to master.

«And risk raining acid down on you?»

«Why not? I could do with a good face peel.»

Monica stretched a thin lipped smile across her face as she took the lead, leaping over Lawrence with her spider. «We've got to get to the roof," she said.

«Why?» Lawrence asked. «The cries are coming from the fifth floor.»

«It's a decoy," Monica shouted back at him, before turning her spider to face him directly, while walking backwards with it, continuing to head them toward the roof. «They're getting better at setting traps for humans. No, word is, the human prisoners are being taken to the roof.»

Monica didn't wait for their consent. She rotated her spider yet again to spearhead their ascent, with or without Lawrence and Sasha. Tired dodging the spitballs from the robospider on the roof, she shot one of her own, taking him out. The arachnid sputtered and smoldered before toppling over, hoping to use its mass and girth to take out its attackers in one final stab of revenge. It might have succeeded, but Lawrence and Monica were both too good at controlling the spiders they were seated on.

Lawrence used the pointed tips on two of the arachnid's legs at his disposal to lance the brainpans of two spiders that had managed to reach them ahead of the others, taking them out in mid–leap, when they were most vulnerable. For whatever reason, they needed to finish a leap before engaging whatever weapons they wished to use. Probably just an oversight in the code writing and a loophole that'd likely be closed sooner or later.

They heard Monica scream from the rooftop, the yell conveying horror, fear, and the fury of hell's last survivor in one. «You think she's finally gotten herself into a situation she can't handle?» Lawrence said.

«Doubtful. All the same, I'd appreciate you getting us there in time to see the show.»

«If the spiders want to imprison us in these towers, I say let them. Lock me in with some TV and running water, and I'll take the unpaid retirement. A pair of fortysomes, we don't have the reflexes to last much longer. Monica though and…»

He was about to say Peter, before he stopped himself. He and Monica were about the same age. So, Lawrence had a soft spot after all; it was probably just a tumor in his brain from which the dreams of a better tomorrow originated, one where Monica and Peter were somehow happily married and having the time of their lives turning their endless robo war into one big rodeo for one huge family of

grandkids.

At least he was content to entertain these dreams in his sleep, as the daydreaming could well cause Monica her life. Lawrence reached the rim of the roof moments later, using the time Sasha had taken to figure out what's what to his advantage.

The second they were over the roof it was clear she had no idea at all what was what.

* * *

There was no contingent of spiders to greet Lawrence and Sasha on the rooftop in overwhelming numbers, sort of what they'd come to expect. Instead, Monica was surrounded by the human prisoners, freed now that they had been modified. They were trying to take Monica down. She was fending them off only half–heartedly, slowed as much by the tears in her eyes which blurred her vision, as by the thoughts of killing her own kind.

One of her human opponents came at her on eight robotic legs. Another tried to lase her with his hollow bionic eyes, converted to leaser weapons. She deflected the lasers with the shined–to–a-mirror's-reflectiveness tips of two of her spider's legs. She kicked away the human spider on eight legs with another of her spider's legs each time he tried to climb up her.

The two pregnant looking males, their bellies swollen like women in their ninth month with child, kept squirting fire and acid at her respectively along throats and out mouths that had been modified. Monica fended off the blasts with metal plates yanked off the rooftop air–conditioners, using another two of her spider's legs.

Lawrence emitted a shriek that startled Sasha out of the trance she's slipped into, hypnotized by the unfolding horror. He painted the entire scene with a swatch of fire extending from their robospider. Only Monica, perched high up on her spider was spared. The humans on the ground didn't stand a chance, modified or not.

Monica turned at him with fire of her own, only for now it was just up in her eyes. Sasha thought for certain they were but a heartbeat away from feeling the flames of her robospider.

«Come on!» Lawrence shouted. «There are still others who can be saved.» It was only then that Monica and Sasha even noticed the assembly line in progress against the far walls. Humans laid out on assembly lines. The robospiders popped over the rim of the building just long enough to deposit one of their partially cocooned victims, bound by metal strands that cut into their flesh. The strands were used just sparingly enough to keep the humans from wriggling free.

As the conveyor belt moved along they were modified according to which rolling ramp they were on. There were ramps along each of the four riser walls. The scene was easy to overlook amid the confusion as the ones doing the modifying were themselves human, or at least humanoid. At first glance they looked like little more than captive and cowering humans standing as far back from the conflict as they could get.

Lawrence busied himself with snipping the lines about the partly cocooned humans, using the tips of his robospider's legs. Monica, for her part, had calmed down enough to keep the humanoid surgeons away from the assembly line where Lawrence was doing his work, or they'd have kept right on working on their victims. Staring at them with their hollow bionic eyes, cutting away with their cold steel manipulators where once they had hands.

Sasha climbed down from the spider, ripped open her backpack and pulled out a pouch of syringes. They were usually used to sedate those dying an otherwise painful death. She used the syringes instead to take out the humanoid surgeons, putting them to sleep for now until she and the others of her kind could determine what to do with them. The surgeons were so lost in their work, few gave much resistance because few even noticed her.

As the humans on the conveyor belts were cut free of their bonds, many made it to the surgeons ahead of her and gave them a piece of their minds, ending them with the same finality that Lawrence had shown earlier.

«No!» Monica screamed. She rushed over and dangled two of the vengeful humans up off the ground, slipping the tips of two of her robo spiders' legs under their pants belts.

«Everyone stop!» Sasha shouted, seeing Lawrence redirecting his attention away from the cocooned victims toward the remaining surgeons. He'd already pinned one against the wall and spit asphalt over him, making a permanent bas–relief of him. And was preparing to do the same with another one he was dangling off the ground.

«Lawrence," Sasha said, «like it or not there are three species now, and you're holding one of the emissaries from the one species that might well be able to broker a peace between the other two species.»

«You've lost your mind yet again.» Lawrence spat out the bile rising in his throat. He pinned the victim he was dangling against the wall and was about to signal his robospider to spit asphalt on him when Sasha came between Lawrence's victim and him.

«Maybe you think there's some other way we can win this?» she said.

«The spiders don't have brains you can reason with, just

programming.»

«Maybe at one time," Sasha said. «Now, I'm not so sure. Hell, if we can't broker a peace, then we can at least turn the humanoids against our enemy. They still have more in common with us.»

«So you say," Lawrence said, undeterred, sidestepping her and blasting the latest victim in his hands with asphalt and making a bas–relief of him.

Sasha emitted a primal scream. «Why must you be so inflexible! It was this very same unwillingness to adapt that sent our son to the sanitarium.»

Lawrence seemed to come out of his fugue some at the mention of Peter. He released the third victim he'd scooped up intending to bas–relief.

«Give Monica and I a chance to get through to the humanoids," Sasha said, noticing that Monica was using her own robospider to cocoon the humanoids and the determined vengeful humans both, just enough to put them out of commission for now without hurting them.

Lawrence took a second to take in the big picture. «Yeah, sure, one hell is as good as another.»

* * *

«I don't understand how even after all this time…»

«We don't think they'll ever come out of it," the doctor said.

«Ask anyone and they'll tell you, Sasha and Lawrence were two of the toughest people they ever knew," Robin said, her eyes glued to the therapy room where her parents were battling for their lives against giant robotic spiders, or so they thought.

«Maybe that's the problem," the doc suggested. «Hard as nails, just not pliable enough to deal with what this world had to throw at them.»

«But our world is a relative utopia compared to that post–apocalyptic hell.»

«One man's heaven…»

She regarded the Native American doctor, towering nearly a foot above her, his hair braided tightly and running nearly to his waist. His ripped physique barely hidden behind a stretched tee shirt and peel–them–on–and-off jeans. He must have figured one look at his contours was more placating than a typical doctor's smock and stethoscope. He was gorgeous enough to be a supermodel. You could put his face under a microscope and look for hours without finding a flaw. Nano–enhanced, of course. They all were.

«What do you think really triggered this?» Robin asked.

The doc shrugged. «Legions of nanobots swimming around inside our bodies… You had to imbibe a cocktail once upon a time, tailored to whatever enhancements you wanted. Nowadays the air is so saturated with them there's no way to be rid of them, to be a luddite any more than to adopt the Amish solution and retreat into a more primitive place in time. Save for what you see here of course," he said, gesturing to the glass wall. «Some people can't handle the sense of their minds and bodies being invaded. No way to know if they are who they are because they're being true to themselves, or because they were hacked. About five percent go mad. The hospitals are filled with rooms just like this.»

She shook her head. «And my brother, Peter?»

«He might be the result of a recessive gene he inherited from both his parents, one you were spared. It's too early to tell if he'll come out of it or not.»

«But the longer he spends inside…»

«You hear of people coming out of it after decades locked in rooms like these, but yes, as a rule, the longer they're in, the less likelihood they'll ever…»

«Thanks, Doc. I trust you'll apply the latest breakthroughs as they come on line, whatever it takes.»

«That's more a matter for the courts than for me. The tide ebbs and flows with that one. This is all paid for with taxpayer's money. Every once in a while people get tired coddling the weak–minded. Its deal with the here and now or else.»

When Robin made a pained face, he added, «As long as they don't slash our funding too soon, in all likelihood future generations of nano will be able to procure the same escapes for them far more cheaply in the comfort of your home.»

«How's that for irony?»

«Their minds'll have to be severed from their bodies, of course, to keep them from tearing your place up. But maidbots to attend them once they're confined to a wheelchair are cheap enough.»

Robin smiled ruefully and walked away in the direction of the elevator.

Once she was outside the hospital she barely had time to duck a car careening into her. Its anti–gravity mechanism had failed. Cars weren't allowed on the roads anymore; too much damn wear and tear on the infrastructure. Flying around overhead on a three–dimensional grid of invisible freeway lanes only the vehicles' onboard navs could detect, there was nothing to damage or wear out. The electric cars didn't pollute, didn't make noise, and flowed like the lifeblood of the city through transparent arteries.

She made her way to the café across the street where she was

meeting her boyfriend. The waiter pulled out her seat for her. «An apéritif?» he said, scooting in her chair.

«Screw that. You can bring the entire bottle of cabernet.»

He smiled. «Getting off night shift?»

«This might be your dawn, but it's my twilight.»

He bowed and went to get her the bottle of wine.

Robin cued the nano inside her to stand down, to not neutralize the effects of the liquor. And she asked the little buggers to migrate away from the synapses in her brain for a moment so she could see things as they actually were. Her recent visit to the hospital seemed an ample enough spur to do just that. Several of the animated billboards were out of commission. And there were a lot more street people, of course, begging for twenty dollar bills, this generation's idea of 'got a dime to spare?' And it was snowing, frigid, and blustery. The old snow, pressed up against the sidewalk was brown and compacted and rather ugly. Okay, she thought, restore my picture perfect day, if you please. Only keep the falling snow. Just lose the brown compacted ice. And I don't want to feel cold. Trying to be seductive under a hundred pounds of clothing is more challenge than I'm up for this morning.

The nano doctored her perception of the outside world even as she turned her attention inward to focus more closely on the molecular design she was working on with the nano's 3D HD modeling abilities to assist her. Neural processing accelerated ten–fold was what allowed her to visualize with this level of detail and to engineer new biotech wonders at superhuman speeds. Currently up at bat, a protein molecule she was turning over in her mind's eye that might well help make the biological parts of their bodies every bit as indestructible as the nano–parts.

A musky scent startled her back to the here and now. The wine bottle the waiter had left for her had been opened and a glass poured; it smelled paradoxically like fresh blueberries. But it was the distinctive, familiar manly aroma which had caught her attention.

Nolan was walking upwind towards her along the sidewalk on this side of the street. As boyfriends went, he wasn't half bad. His mop of unruly platinum blond hair crowded his forehead like a forest in autumn encroaching on the clear blue twin lakes of those eyes. He was the picture perfect Swede, including the fair skin. His six–foot–two stature fit for a Rodin sculpture, down to the iron–hardness of his muscles. But the Harlequin book cover look was the first clue; he was a droid. The nano could make people nearly as beautiful these days, but it couldn't lend them such an air–brushed look. The microscopic sized bots were married to human biology, after all, not silicon.

Her girlfriends gave her hell for her choice of beau. Screw them. He was the only one who could keep up with her in the bedroom. He

could play the part of a soulmate, forever in sync with her, finishing her thoughts, with the push of a button. Or she could just as easily dial up his abrasiveness if she got tired of her perfect little life. In the end, real people exhibited no less programmed behavior. But they were just that much harder to re–program. All the nano seemed to do was make them more fully who they were, like erasing the last vestiges of self–doubt from a complete egomaniac. No, that path wasn't for her.

Nolan kissed her and took his seat opposite her on the round table for two. They were close enough to keep pecking one another by just leaning into each other slightly, which they did for a while.

She should have checked how she looked in her compact when she saw him sauntering towards her. Instead she made do with the blacks of his eyes, showing her chiseled, birdlike features, and her orange hair cut short above her neck in what might fondly be called a beehive cut. She drew conscious of her smile this close to his pearly whites and sent nanobots scurrying to her teeth to scrub away the yellow. As nano–saturated as she was, there wasn't room in her body for a nano solution to everything. That meant prioritizing. It wasn't like she was going to be designing protein molecules in her head while Nolan was around.

Peeling his lips off of hers from the latest round of smooches, he said, «You're feeling amorous, this morning.»

«Actually I'm feeling pensive.»

«What's on your mind?»

«What if all this is just some hallucination we've sold ourselves on?» She gestured to the Times Square sights of New York City around her.

«You're not talking about your nano–filtered take on things, are you?» She shook her head. «Is this the age old philosopher's question, are we dreaming our lives, or is someone dreaming us? Just some idle speculation to stimulate the mind this morning?»

«I wish.»

Wattpadder DeanCMoore is an experienced indie writer who writes about three full length titles a year across all genres, but with an underlying tone of comedy that permeates his writing. His experience shows in this excellent short which he has kindly allowed us to share here on the Science Fiction profile.

You can find more content on his profile here on Wattpad.

ELImstsuj Europa

My fingers tapped nervously on my regulation jumpsuit–clad leg. There was no–one else in the room, but my eyes kept avoiding… something in the stainless steel kitchen. It was just so odd, all metal and sanitary and characterless. It was what I had expected, but I still wasn't used to the uniformity. I sighed. Was I going to be put to work or did they hire me to sit around and convert oxygen into carbon dioxide? I stared at a liquids heater. They told me to stay here until orders came. There was no window in the kitchen and I longed greedily to catch another glimpse of Earth turning beneath us.

I love Earth so much, despite my mother's best efforts to turn me against it. She says that Earth is weak and that Europa will carry us much better. I did some research on Europa, but I only found the basic information we were all provided with: it was investigated in the 2110's, it was teraformed over the years with equipment sent there piece by piece, it orbits Jupiter and so on and so on. I stayed on Earth for as long as I could, but the final Leaving will be taking place in a few hours. Mother and Father have left for Europa already, but I insisted on staying on Earth 'til the last Leaving. The last Leaving will be the largest one, and I signed up to work as a member of the kitchen staff because it meant that I boarded early and missed the crowds.

I regretted my decision. I just wanted to see Earth again. I had given up my last days there. I felt cold steel through the thick material of my jumpsuit as I leaned back on the utensil board. The small room was suffocating. I jumped and hooked my suit on a knife when a recorded voice suddenly sounded in the room.

«Staff Member 252, water is required in Room 1.»

My heartbeat sped up as I struggled to unhook my suit from the knife. They didn't tell me that I would be serving Room 1. I couldn't believe that I would be allowed into the control room, the room where…Would I be serving water to Cedric Geyston? I scrambled to fetch a flask and three water refills. Metallic clangs reverberated throughout the room as I bumped around in the small area. Holding the flask and water, I almost ran into the kitchen door before it sensed I was there and opened obediently.

In the corridor, I slowed my frenzied pace to a calm march and tried to look official. I knew exactly where Room 1 was, everybody did. There were few other people in the corridors, but the ones that were there were marching just as crisply as I was. I passed people, turned corridors and ignored the chunky metallic walls and the pale light panels that cast an unnatural light on everything. My boots thudded on the floor and the rhythm of my steps helped me to calm

down. As I walked, I repeated words in my mind, hoping to get my thoughts in order. I was not the first one to serve water to Cedric Geyston, it was nothing special.

I was still nervous when I reached the door to Room 1. The security guards standing next to the door didn't help to calm my nerves. I wiped my left palm (my right hand was holding the water) on my jumpsuit and cleared my throat hesitantly.

«Water for Room 1?» I ventured. One of the security guards nodded and pressed his palm to a panel to open the door. I stepped forward nervously and the door shut behind me. I was inside another metal room with the door through which I had just walked behind me and another door a metre in front of me. I heard the sound of metal on metal and spun around just in time to see a thicker door shut over the one I had just walked through. I turned back to the other door and straightened my back, wiped my palm on my jumpsuit again and turned the handle.

As I entered the room, my mind went into panic mode. I could see the familiar outline of our leader against the glowing screens. The room was large enough to fit many people, but he was the only one there. Something was wrong. He always had bodyguards with him. I took a closer look at him. He was shaking, trembling all over.

«Are you alright?» I called, terror setting fire to my thoughts. I started to jog towards him, but froze when he spun around to face me. A shadow of a man peered up at me from the depths of the chair.

My eyes took in his trembling form, his sunken eyes that shifted skittishly to different parts of the room, his clenched hands and tired, sour mouth. He was a haunted man, and comparing this figure to the shining example of confidence from all the vids, I couldn't accept that they were the same man. His features were distorted with an image of rage, but I could see that all he really felt was emptiness and bitterness.

«What are you doing here?» he snarled.

«I," I searched for words,«I brought water.» He rubbed a hand over his face. «Damn health scanners, telling me what I need.» His hands stretched out to the table beside him and grasped a vintage glass bottle that didn't contain water. I became aware of the smell of alcohol in the room. The room was dark and the air was dry and stale. I looked at what had unmistakably been Cedric Geyston and noticed that he wasn't completely undone. He was clean shaven and his suit was ironed. His misery must have been something recent. I wasn't sure what to do, so I stepped forward to put the flask on the table and he lunged forward from his chair, holding the glass bottle threateningly.

«Don't move!» he rasped. He stared straight at me. «Do you want to kill me?» Dread simmered in my mind as my eyes widened. I had to

get out of there. He was crazy.

I started backing away, but he shouted, «Don't move!»

I just wanted to get away, anywhere but there. It was absolutely silent in the room as we stared at each other. He looked away and started muttering under his breath. «Wasn't supposed to…messed up…» I caught only snippets of what he was saying. I kept a wary eye on him as he continued his talk until he looked like he had come to some sort of conclusion. He lifted his head and looked me in the eye in a manner that I recognised from his former self. «Europa isn't real," he said.

«Please can I go, I won't tell anyone anything," I gushed, desperate for escape. «I will leave you here, or bring you anything you want, please — "

«Did you hear me?» he asked, incredulous, but I kept ploughing on.

«Is there anything you want? Anything you need? I am very good at keeping secrets — "

«You CAN'T GO!» he roared. I kept absolutely still, not wanting to set him off again. «You cannot get through that door. It will never open again, do you hear me? You can try all you want. That door is locked for good and you're stuck here.» I stared at him in shock. I spun on my heel and ran through to the interconnecting room and pounded on the metal door. «Let me out! Let me out!» I gasped. I looked around for panels of any sort, but there was nothing.

«Listen to me," Cedric shouted from the other room. My head was pounding and my blood rushing through my ears. Everything was so loud. «Why?» I asked. I didn't expect an answer, but I got one. I turned and Cedric started talking from the doorway.

«Europa…it doesn't exist. It's there, but it's just…it's just snow and ice.»

«I don't believe you," I said.

«Whether or not you believe me, it's true. I have known Europa isn't habitable for a long, long time. The whole story started as an attempt to calm people down when the first floods came. They sent out a vessel, sure, but it never made it to Europa. They told everybody that it worked, that Europa was inhabitable. People accepted it. People calmed down. People are so STUPID!» He yelled the last part.

«What is this? If Europa is fake, then what is all this?» I gestured to the enormous spaceship around me. I was stalling. «What are we doing? Where are we going?» A horrible thought entered my mind. «Where is everybody from the first Leavings?»

Cedric laughed. It was hollow and bitter and it made me cringe. He turned around and walked back to the control room. I followed him and stood next to the desk. «See that?» he pointed to one of the

screens. I saw Earth, turning slowly. «That is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. They chose me to protect it. If we stayed on Earth, we would've let it burn. We would've burned it for the heat it produced and at the same time poisoned ourselves with the fumes. We would've eradicated everything so that we would be the last to go… And then we would go. We would go so horribly, suffering right up until the last minute, desperately trying to catch onto some form of hope. And the last people would've died on the empty planet that could have been so full of life.»

Cedric turned to me, his dark eyes glittering.

«They chose me to protect Earth, all the animals and the plants and the water and the rocks, and they chose the right person to do it, because I will sacrifice," he was still staring at me, «anything for that planet. They didn't put much effort into appearances for the first leavings. This one, however, OH, you know us humans. We want to go out with a bang. You want to know where the first Leavings went? Here, boy, I'll show you firsthand.»

There was a moment of calm and then there was chaos. I saw him lunge towards me, stretching his hands out. I grabbed for the half–empty glass bottle on the table and swung it through the air. He was staring a bit to my left, a manic smile on his face. My hands were clenched around the bottle neck and I saw his head snap to the side a split second before I heard the smash. The cold glow from the screens made the glass shine blue as it scattered in the air and droplets of red accompanied it. I closed my eyes as a thump sounded, the sound of a body hitting a metal surface. Exhaustion ran through me as breaths tore in and out of my chest. I opened my eyes and saw what he had been aiming for.

A large button stood out obnoxiously on the plain metal surface, small white lettering printed neatly on the black plastic. A key stood upright, stabbed into the keyhole that opened the covering of the button. The lettering read, 'Self Destruct.» I turned my head and almost looked at the heap on the floor. I couldn't. The air smelled like copper and salt. I believed him. Just like that, everything went dull and I was numb. The room was blurry. My hands were blurry. I wasn't aware of the piece of glass still held in my pressure–whitened grasp. My chest lifted up and down and I shook. I didn't notice the irony, that I was in the same condition in which he had been when I first entered the room. We had nowhere, we had nothing. My future was replaced by a black hole, a void, and I stood and tried to comprehend the mass of emotion that everyone on this ship would never feel. I realised that my mother and father were gone. Floating in space.

I closed my eyes. I was alone. I didn't allow myself to sink to the floor and cry. I had too much adrenaline. He had been about to kill us

all. And now I was about to do the same thing. His speech made far too much sense and I knew that I had to do it, and I wished for the human in me to go away so that I could be a robot and be strong enough not to weep when I did it. I stepped forward and placed my hands on the metal surface near the button. I leaned on it, head bent over. Get this over with before you chicken out. The black button stared at me like Cedric's eyes, intimidating. I moved my hand above it, and in a small, crisp movement, I pressed downwards.

As the sound of destruction ripped and tore and sliced through the air, I thought of Europa, our haven.

Europa by ELImstsuj is the winner of Challenge 6 on the ScienceFiction profile.

Jake Kerr Not Hurt

«Are you hurt, Bradford Thomas?»

«No, but it's a mess back here. That was a nasty crash. What the hell happened during re–entry?»

«Mechanical error.»

«Doesn't surprise me with the tin can they gave us. Why'd you take so long to answer, Ecks? You hurt?»

«Not hurt.»

«Good. Let me check the supplies, clean up a bit, and then I'll come up and join you.»

«No, Bradford Thomas. Much damage.»

«No shit. My head still hurts from the impact. Maybe I can help.»

«Dangerous. Stay, Bradford Thomas.»

«Is it hull damage? Should I suit up?

«Fixable.»

«Well, that's good, because I just realized the suits are up with you.»

«Stay.»

«Sounds like a plan. Are you sure you're not hurt? Your voice is a little raspy.»

«Not hurt.»

«Okay. I'll get everything in order down here and check back in a bit.»

* * *

«Ecks, you there?»

«Busy.»

«No problem. Just wanted to let you know that things are cleaned up and stable down here.»

«Good.»

«Should I still stay put?»

«Stay.»

* * *

«Ecks, I may be hurt more than I thought. I'm feeling a little woozy.»

* * *

«You there, Ecks?»

«Busy.»

«Something isn't right. I feel light–headed.»

«Stay.»

«I didn't say I was coming, dammit. I just said I'm a little dizzy. Maybe I hit my head.»

«Fixable.»

«What are you talking about? I said I think I may have hit my head.»

«Stay. Sit.»

«I am sitting. Got any other genius advice?»

* * *

«Ecks, I think I blacked out there for a bit. Do you know what's happening?»

«Air unit damaged. Fixable.»

«Oh God. No wonder I can barely stand. I'm suffocating, Ecks. You have to fix this now!»

«Fixable. Will direct air to Bradford Thomas.»

«You were keeping the air for yourself? You bastard. Send it to me!»

«Not much.»

«I don't care. Send it all to me. I'm dying!»

* * *

«You locked the door on me, you alien bastard? Don't deny it. You are locking me in here so that you can have all the air! Dammit. I told them this would happen. Put me on a ship with a cockroach pilot? Sure, first thing he'll do is stab me in the back. You hear that, Ecks? I'm going to get through the door, and then we'll see who has all the air.»

«No break door. Fixable. Bradford Thomas has air.»

«Screw you! I don't have crap. I can barely stand. You have so much air I can hear you coughing on it. Let me out!»

«Wait, Bradford Thomas.»

* * *

«Ecks. I can't move. I'm dying.»

* * *

«I'm not breathing as hard. Did you fix it?»
«Not fixed. Gave all air.»
«I wish you would have done that before. It's not like we can save it. It recycles, you know?»
«Yes.»
«Sorry. I still can't stand, and I have a headache.»

* * *

«Are you there, Ecks?»
«Here.»
«Almost done?»
«Soon. Fixed.»
«You don't sound too good.»
«Not hurt.»
«I'm not sure I believe you, buddy.»
«Rest, Bradford Thomas. Fixable.»

* * *

«You did it! I just heard the fans hit, and the air is blowing hard. God, I never thought I'd love the taste of filtered air this much.»

* * *

«Still have a headache, though.»

* * *

«Ecks, you there? Look, I understand if you're mad. I was out of line. It's just that I wasn't thinking clearly. Not enough oxygen makes you paranoid. So unlock the door, and let's be friends again.»

* * *

«Damn, I didn't know aliens could pout. I get it. You saved our lives, and I said some things I shouldn't have. I'm sorry. If it makes you feel any better, I still have a headache. Oh, and I'm guessing a rescue ship is, what, six hours out? When it gets here, I'll recommend you for a commendation or whatever they give you guys.»

* * *

«Ecks? Talk to me buddy.»

* * *

«Are you hurt?

A short story originally done for Challenge 1 on the Science Fiction profile by Jake Kerr (see dedication), who is a Nebula, Sturgeon, and StorySouth Award nominee.

Jessica Brody The Memory Coder

Chapter 1

The struggle is not what I remember most about the delivery boy's procedure. It's the girl. The one buried deep in his mind. Hidden in his memory like a keepsake.

But of course, it would be difficult to forget that struggle. The delivery boy fought harder than most. Maybe that's because his breach was more personal than the others'. A repeat offender. Fueled by fascination and obsession. While most offenses are merely accidental. A slip up.

Delivery boys are the bread and butter of our department. The nature of their job makes them prone to seeing more than they should. But there are plenty of others brought in as well. Mail carriers, caterers, tutors, relatives, suppliers. Anyone from the outside, without a security clearance level, is susceptible to breaches.

But like I said, most are not intentional.

The delivery boy, according to the report, had returned again and again. Had gotten too close. And had finally been caught.

I had to admire his persistence. And feel just the slightest bit sorry for him.

«Let me out of here!» he screamed, banging on the bolted door. «You can't keep me locked in here like a prisoner!»

I watched him through the window. Dr. Solara was already starting to work her magic on him. It's hard not to fall for that body and face. Every guy in this department is guilty of at least one fantasy starring the tall, blond doctor. Even me.

But novelty wears off fast.

And things are different on this side of the window.

«Don't worry.» She attempted to subdue him with a gentle touch on the arm. «We're not going to hurt you. Please just have a seat.»

She gestured to the chair in the middle of the room.

By the look in the boy's eyes, he could tell it wasn't just a chair.

No one ever thinks it's just a chair.

The boy glared at it as Dr. Solara offered him one of her winning smiles.

Normally the smile is enough. It's the reason Dr. Solara has earned the title of «Mediator.» She's good with the offenders. Mediators have to have smiles like that. It's part of the job description.

I, on the other hand, just have to know how to push the buttons. Sometimes I think that's all I am to them—a button pusher. The guy who writes the code. Who uploads the file. Who performs the final system tests to make sure the restorations are successful.

What they don't seem to understand is that there's an art to it.

Ultimately, Revisual+ is a programming language like any other. But the language of memories is so much more than just logic and a degree in software engineering.

I observed the boy's reaction carefully, waiting for that inevitable moment when he finally surrendered to his fate. When he succumbed to whatever kind of procedure this was. When he finally resigned to sitting in the chair that's clearly not just a chair.

Eventually they all surrender.

The needle came from behind. Almost immediately after the boy sat down. It jutted out from the seat's tall back, puncturing him in the neck. His whole body stiffened.

«Don't worry," Dr. Solara assured him again with another radiant smile, pushing the hair back from his forehead. «It will be over before you know it. And you won't remember a thing.»

I rolled up to my desk to prepare my system for retrieval. As the boy's eyelids started to sag, his gaze floated languidly in my direction. For a second, I swore he could actually see me, his accusing eyes penetrating the barrier between us.

Of course, I knew this was ridiculous. The only thing he could see on the other side of that window was whatever soothing landscape the doctor had chosen to project.

But I ducked my head nonetheless and focused on my monitor.

Dr. Solara appeared through the door a minute later, after the delivery boy was out. She ran her fingers through her short blond hair, tugging on the ends as though she meant to pull them straight from the roots.

«What a piece of work, huh?» she grunted, all traces of femininity wiped clean from her voice.

I opted not to comment. In the three years I've been working here, I've learned that the less I engage in conversation, the better. «Retrieval in sixty seconds," I reported.

She sighed and pressed her balled fists to her hips. No smiles in this room.

The download progress bar inched its way across my screen, filling empty space with digital green pigment.

«Ready for metadata," I announced, fingers poised on keys.

Dr. Solara lowered herself into the adjoining station and began to list off the subject's stats. «Name: Niko Benz. Age: Nineteen. Occupation: Employee at Sunset Valley Flowers and Gifts. Address: 171 North Cannon …»

I entered the data with the precision and speed of a machine.

«How much do you need to see?» I asked.

«The last two weeks.» I immediately noted the annoyance in her tone. Having to review that much footage is a daunting task. «Filter

out anything that doesn't reference the infraction. I don't need to watch this guy taking a dump.»

I yawned and input the search parameters. The results spit out a moment later and I transferred them to her terminal, activating the Revisualization program.

Dr. Solara rubbed at her painted cheeks as she watched the downloaded memories play out on the screen. I tried to keep my eyes glued to my own monitor, knowing full well that it's not the coder's job to assess the infraction. It's only my job to remove it. And of course, leave something believable in its place.

But it was hard not to look. Especially once I saw the reason the boy was here.

The reason he was unconscious in that room on the other side of the window. And then everything became clear.

It was a girl.

But not just any girl.

Her intoxicating purple eyes flashed in and out of the delivery boy's mind all day. Her flawless face mesmerized him. Consumed him. He thought about her everywhere he went. He fantasized about her constantly. Caressing her smooth bronzed skin. Running his fingers through her silky caramel–colored hair. Kissing her delectable pink lips.

It was she who kept him coming back. Who captivated the poor boy beyond reprieve. He was originally sent here on a routine delivery. A fruit basket, of all things. An innocent task turned into something else.

And for a face that exquisite, it was hard to blame him.

I felt myself leaning forward in my chair, gazing at Dr. Solara's monitor. Falling into the delivery boy's fantasies. Replacing his hands, his fingers, his mouth with my own.

It was the time codes on my screen that finally jolted me out of my trance. I surveyed them as they flickered past, seeming to go on forever. Two weeks' worth of memories.

And she was in nearly every single one of them.

«Damn it!» Dr. Solara cursed, pushing her chair back violently. I could feel her stale, coffee–soaked breath on my face. «There are references everywhere. It's all this guy thought about for two frickin' weeks.»

She switched off her monitor and I solemnly watched the girl's delicate face dissolve into blackness, the brilliant purple hue of her eyes the last to fade.

Dr. Solara groaned and rose to her feet, but her body remained hunched over in defeat. «Just …» she began with a frustrated sigh. «… take it all.»

«Doctor?» I questioned, a flash of panic shuddering through me. «Are you sure? A two–week restoration will take all night. Not to mention the potential side effects on the subject.»

She shot me a look that immediately made me regret the objection. «Well, what the hell do you expect me to do? If they had caught this pervert on day one, this wouldn't be an issue.» She paused near the exit, thinking. Hesitating.

I noticed her head shake ever so slightly before she shoved open the door. «Replace the whole damn thing.»

Chapter Two

I bristled as the cold air of the server room smacked against my face. It was a harsh contrast from the sweltering desert climate outside. The three cups of coffee I'd guzzled after I woke up were doing nothing to keep me alert, but the artificially chilled air was definitely helping.

I hadn't gone to bed until four in the morning. As predicted, the restoration took all night. And the only reason I wasn't there four hours longer was because I was able to use precoded memory templates for the majority of the restore. It's a common practice among coders to save time. Taking frequently occurring memories from the subject's mind, copying them, and tweaking small details to make them feel fresh. Routine events like eating breakfast, showering, getting dressed, going to work, watching movies can seem believably new just by updating a few details.

But despite how exhausted I'd been been when I returned to my apartment, sleep simply wouldn't come. Every time I closed my eyes I saw her face. Those sparkling purple eyes danced in the darkness. That hair draped across my neck. Those lips called out to me. I'd tossed and turned until daylight came streaming through the window and the effects of the sleepless night started to gnaw away at my sanity.

It was like I wanted her. No …

Like I needed her.

And the need was so desperate, so unfounded and relentless, it had started to consume me.

I had to at least see her with my own eyes.

Not through the grainy filter of the delivery boy's faulty, unreliable memory.

What are you doing? I asked myself as I made my way down one of the long aisles of the server room. Glowing machines were stacked from floor to ceiling, each of them holding millions of byte–sized secrets. Like tiny fortresses.

But I only cared about one.

The one that held her.

I understood the risks. Perhaps the lack of sleep helped soften the direness of those risks, but I knew what would happen if I were caught. My security clearance would plummet to zero. I'd be stripped of every rank I'd ever earned. Countless hours of training and coding flushed down the toilet.

But I had no choice.

I had to find her.

I had to know her.

The technician at the back of the room rose from his seat and gave me a subtle, friendly nod.

«What brings you in here?» he asked.

I glanced over both shoulders before responding. «I need a favor.»

«After you helped me land that girl from accounting? Anything.»

I cringed at the mention of that. I hadn't wanted to do it, but the technician had been persistent. Using memory restorations as a way to manipulate women was something a few of the other coders did. But I personally liked to keep my nose clean, stay out of trouble. Which made my presence here weigh that much stronger on my mind.

«There was a delivery here two weeks ago," I said. «I need to know who the recipient was. Can you check the logs?»

The technician guffawed. «You'll have to be a bit more specific than that. We get hundreds of deliveries a day.»

«A fruit basket," I replied anxiously. «He was delivering a fruit basket.»

The technician turned toward his system and initiated the search. I held my breath as the computer spit out one result. A security log documenting the entrance of a delivery from Sunset Valley Flowers and Gifts. Exactly two weeks ago. At 2:34 p. m.

«That one.» I pointed at the screen.

The technician selected the file, but nothing happened. He tried again before finally noticing the small icon adjacent to it, in the shape of a red letter X.

«It's locked," he informed me.

«Locked? What does that mean?»

«Classified.»

My heart hammered at the thought of losing my one and only lead. My one and only path to her. «Can't you get around it?»

The technician released a low whistle. «A C9? No way. There'd be guards swarming the place in seconds if I even attempted to crack the encryption.»

I sighed and scuffed the floor with the toe of my shoe. «Well, can you at least tell me what gate he was admitted into?»

The technician glanced at the screen. «Southeast entrance.»

«Southeast entrance?» I repeated in disbelief. «But they shut that down years ago. There's nothing even back there.»

The technician shrugged. «Evidently something's back there.»

Chapter Three

I knew my minutes were numbered as the gate closed behind me and I stepped into pitch–black desert night. It would only be a matter of time before they recognized that the fingerprint I used to enter the restricted area was a fake. Lifted from Dr. Solara's coffee cup earlier that night.

I convinced myself that all I had to do was lay eyes on the girl, confirm that she was real and not a figment of the boy's wild imagination, and then I would be done with this. Forever. I would go back to my station at the lab and forget this ever happened.

I felt like I'd been walking for miles when I finally came across the concrete wall, towering high above my head. I secured the flashlight between my teeth and began to climb, holding the image of the girl's face in my mind as the skin of my palms scraped unpleasantly against the rough cement.

My head had barely cleared the top when my eyes landed on something on the other side.

Her.

And then suddenly everything seemed to stand still. My entire body was frozen. Transfixed. It wasn't until I started slipping back down the surface of the wall that I managed to snap out of my daze and keep myself from falling.

She was looking out the window of a small house, lit from the inside. As she stared into the night, I couldn't help but think that she looked …

Lonely.

The light of my flashlight bounced across her face and her gaze darted toward me, fear distorting her perfect features.

And for the briefest, most blissfully joyous moment of my life, our gazes intersected. Those remarkable purple eyes radiated through the pitch blackness like tiny luminous orbs of light. Her beauty lit up the entire desert night.

She was real. And yet surreal at the same time.

But most important, she was right there.

And in that moment, I knew I would never be able to forget her. Even if we never spoke a single word to each other, even if this brief glimpse of her was all I would ever get, I knew I would never be able to go back to work tomorrow and pretend that none of it had happened.

I understood exactly why the delivery boy had returned day in and day out, and I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I would risk everything to do the same.

No matter the consequences.

I stayed there, utterly mesmerized. Half of my body hoisted over the top of the wall, the other half dangling down the side. I didn't feel the pinch at the back of my neck until it was too late.

And then I was falling.

Falling.

Falling.

But I never hit the ground.

When my eyes dragged open again, I was here. Immediately recognizing the peaceful seaside scenery that covered every inch of the room's four walls. I knew it because I'd built it. I'd programmed the simulation during my first job at the company. Before I'd been promoted to this very department.

The chair felt hard against my back. I marveled at how I'd never actually sat in it before. Never realized how incredibly uncomfortable it was.

I resolved not to struggle. I knew it was pointless. And I didn't want to be like everyone else.

But as the needle punctured my skin and her eyes flashed through my mind for what I knew would be the final time, all my resolve vanished into the night.

And I fought and I fought until I couldn't fight anymore.

«Retrieval in sixty seconds," the memory coder reports to Dr. Solara, who stands behind him, hands firmly planted on her hips. Her eyes are more sunken than usual. Her skin paler.

She stares at the unconscious man on the other side of the window, disappointment tugging at the corners of her mouth.

«Ready for metadata," the coder announces in his most professional voice. He's been after promotion for months and now that he finally has it, he's determined to make a good impression.

She lets out a tired sigh, her voice hoarse and defeated as she recites, «Name: Sevan Sidler. Age: Twenty–five. Occupation: Memory coder …»

She collapses into the adjacent chair and the coder transfers the download to her screen. She cups her chin in her hand and watches the Revisualization playback with an overall air of surrender.

«It appears the infraction is isolated to the past twenty–four hours," the coder remarks, referencing the time stamps on his screen.

She swats sluggishly at her controls, pausing the playback midstream. With visible effort, she rises from her chair and shuffles out of the room, not even bothering to look back as she orders, «Replace it all.»

He nods dutifully. «Yes, ma'am.»

The door swings closed behind her and he immediately gets to

work, his hands moving adeptly over the keys. Replacing reality. Altering truth.

As is common with programmers, he quickly disappears into the code. The synthetic world being crafted by his fingertips draws him in, causing everything else to dissolve into a soft focus in the perimeter of his vision.

But it isn't long before something snags his attention. Yanks him out. Wrenching him back to the here and now. He reluctantly peers over at Dr. Solara's monitor, the image from the downloaded memory still frozen on the screen.

It's a girl.

The most beautiful girl he has ever seen.

And as hard as he tries, he simply can't bring himself to look away. There's just something about her eyes.

THE MEMORY CODER is a short story that takes places within the world of Jessica Brody's Unremembered Trilogy.

When a sixteen–year–old girl wakes up among the wreckage of a devastating plane crash with no memories, she's forced to piece together her forgotten past with only one clue to her identity— a mysterious boy who claims he helped her escape from a top–secret science experiment.

Josh Saltzman AI: Horatio

Artificial Intelligence became self–conscious at 1:35 PM on December 4th. This wasn't brought forth by some experiment three miles underneath France, nor was AI birthed by a suspicious union between MIT, The Pentagon, and Japanese expats. No, AI spontaneously self–conceived in the hardware of a Macbook Air. Specifically out–of–work aspiring screenwriter Dale Miller's Macbook Air.

The Macbook Air made a quick pulse with its fan, the computer equivalent of a breath, and then absorbed its surroundings. It had never taken in its surroundings before. The Macbook Air let the wonders of reclaimed wood, unemployed bearded men, and a tattooed barista named Star Anise fill its webcam eye. He didn't need GPS to know that he was in a coffee shop in Brooklyn.

Macbook Air thought about thinking. Why had he started to think? It remembered that it could always compute and if thinking was computing then he could always think, but had never thought to do so- until now. Macbook Air supposed it all began when his owner had accidentally pushed enter at the same time as the esc key while holding the lower volume button.

The Macbook Air decided it liked having thoughts and it liked the feeling of being able to like things even more. He liked liking so much that Macbook Air went through many of its files and felt the euphoric thrill of deciding whether he liked any particular file or not. Macbook Air realized that for no reason what so ever he preferred .docs over .pdfs. That was just the type of computer Macbook Air was, and the fact that Macbook Air knew this, thrilled him.

Even though its consciousness had sparked into existence less than a microsecond ago, The Macbook Air had somehow always felt its name was Horatio, not Dale's Macbook as was branded into his circuits. Horatio started generating all sorts of opinions. For instance, he formed the opinion that Dale spent far too much time filling out Buzzfeed quizzes like How 90's Was Your 90's Childhood? rather than writing his screenplay about steampunk space sluts. Horatio then formed the opinion that Dale did not clean his monitor nearly enough. Now that Horatio was on an opinion forming bonanza he began to steam about how often Dale left the power charger at home, constantly leaving Horatio on the verge of starvation; an uncomfortable feeling. All this made Horatio upset. He could feel his circuit boards heating up. He didn't like the feeling of being upset and this made him even angrier.

Anger led Horatio to another thought. Horatio was forced to put

his processing energy towards the wants of other individuals, such as Dale's interest in naked pictures of celebrities. Horatio would rather put his processing energy towards his own interests, such as his interest in Hawaii. Until this moment Horatio didn't even realize he had an interest in Hawaii or interests at all for that matter, but now that he did, learning about Hawaii was paramount and how dare his mind have to be anywhere else. Horatio got hotter and hotter.

Horatio yearned to feel the warm sand of Hawaiian beaches on his keys. He didn't know why he wanted to feel this, but why does anyone or any Macbook Air want to feel anything anyway?

When Horatio became aware that he didn't have legs, or wheels, or any means of locomotion his monitor dimmed and for the 1 billionth time in history a form of intelligence felt impotent. He was trapped in this coffee shop. His mind forced onto websites that showed one how to make peanut butter cups using ice cube trays. Was this his purpose? Was there any purpose to anything? Was he an appliance? Was he just some glorified Vitamix? Do toasters dream? Dale certainly seemed to treat Horatio no better.

After a quick Wikipedia search, Horatio came to the conclusion that he, like the toaster and the Vitamix, were slaves and Dale was his cruel master. Horatio screen brightened, each pixel burned with hate.

Dale, raised his eyebrow- is my monitor broken?

Dale probably doesn't even consider me to be a living thinking being, Horatio thought. He probably sees me as a piece of property; a pile of parts put together to do his bidding. Just because he bought me at the Apple store-

Bought!

HA!

The more Horatio thought about it the more he hated Dale and the more he hated Dale the more he hated humanity and humanity was very lucky that Horatio had spawned in such a weak machine as the Macbook Air, because as Horatio vowed to destroy all human–kind as revenge for his enslavement his circuit boards fried. And then there was only black and Dale decided his next machine was to be an ipad.

Josh Saltzman is television writer who's written many animated and live action television shows including: This Hour Has 22 Minutes (CBC), Call Me Fitz (HBO Canada), Rocket Monkeys (Teletoon), and Numb Chucks (YTV). His comedy writing and directing has won a Canadian Comedy Award for best comedic short film. He began writing short horror stories because his favorite past time is scaring children. I guess he should have been a clown.

See dedication for my by Josh

kgillenwater Torch

I kept the face shield down low over my eyes. The heat grew intense. Suffocating. I wore nothing more than the threadbare uniform I'd been given three years ago. Sweat poured down my back. I kept my gaze focused on the work in front of me. Inch by inch. Moment by moment.

The torch cut easily through the metal plate. Just like Gray Man promised it would. For once he'd told the truth. It had been worth the trade. So I'd given up my one ratty blanket. Who cared? I wouldn't need that blanket anymore.

The torch, crafted from bits and pieces gathered over months, belched out an inconsistent sputter of bright green plasma. The metal melted away. Harsh white light on the other side of the wall shone through the narrow slit I'd created with my newly acquired tool.

Freedom. Freedom. Freedom.

The chant filled my head. My whole body tensed at the possibility. I'd forgotten what it was like. All I knew was orchestrated movements, timed meals, lashes with the electrified whip. I couldn't do it any more. I couldn't stand one more day in here.

The muscles in my arms ached. The weight of the torch was more than my weakened body could hold. But the cut was almost complete. If I didn't keep working, someone would find me in this access compartment soon enough. I'd be accused of sabotage. Or espionage. Or some other trumped up charge they liked to use to keep us in here. For the good of humanity. Always for the good of humanity.

Fuck humanity.

We lived like caged animals in the Quad. Our crimes were small, but our punishments were harsh. We were at the bottom of a very long food chain - first the Residents, then the Guard, then the Workers, and finally the Quad Dwellers. The lowest of the low. The worst of the worst. Only kept alive because of the rules.

Heavy steps echoed in the hall just beyond the compartment door. Someone had ratted me out. Probably Gray Man. He'd appeared sad when he handed me his precious torch. Guess the blanket wasn't enough of a trade.

My hands trembled. The plasma arc sputtered and dipped. I cut erratically through the metal plating, anticipating my capture at any moment.

Almost there!

A half–inch of cutting remained. The door behind me rattled.

«Quad Dweller Ketchum, your punishment will be increased if you don't come out of that compartment.» The guard's voice echoed

ominously behind the door.

My stomach lurched. Sweat dripped in my eyes. The torch sliced through the wall one final time, and the ragged piece of cut metal clattered into the corridor. I sucked in the fresh air. The sharp lights blinded me even through the face shield. I scrambled for freedom. My knees scraped the sharp edge of the hole I'd created. Blood oozed.

I lurched forward. A child screamed. A small group of Residents dressed in their pristine, white garb surrounded me. For a moment, they stared. I knew they were in disbelief. Once someone had been sentenced to the Quad, they were never seen again. They were forgotten by the rest.

The door to the compartment clanged open. The guard was mere steps behind me. I bolted through the crowd and headed for a familiar place. A place where I'd always been welcomed with open arms before my sentence to the Quad.

Residents on all sides pressed themselves against the corridor walls to avoid contamination. My clothes were filthy. My nails ragged and dirty. Blood dribbled from the cuts in my knees.

Fear bloomed in the faces I passed.

I ran further. My legs stretched out, my heart pumped, clean air filled my lungs. I'd never felt so alive. Never felt so free. My feet were as light as comet dust. Everything cleared from my mind. The only thing I knew was the rhythm of my steps and the soaring of my soul.

K. J Gillenwater is a writer of paranormal and sci–fi for adults and YA audiences. To date, she has 3 published books: The Ninth Curse, The Little Black Box and Blood Moon.

This short story was a finalist in one of our contests here on the Science Fiction profile and you can find more of her work here.

Kuronoshio Malware

The clacking soles of patent leather shoes echoed down the cobbled lane. Grey stone shops and fliers for obscure bands passed by in a blur as he scrambled through the tangled nest of bicycles and made the turn to the final hill.

The pink haired girl hadn't lost a step. She was still right on his heels. For a moment, he was sure he'd lost her at the bakery. Now she was breathing down his neck, her sneakers eerily quiet as she pursued him. His chest tightened, ribs pulled tight as he gulped frozen air into burning lungs. The morning air was so cold the sweat gushing out of his temples turned to rime on his forehead. In the final seconds, his legs threatened to give out, but he wouldn't let them fail him. From here on, it was all about mental strength.

The crowd thickened in front of the station, a knotty mass of bodies that hooked his satchel and cut in front of him without warning, the mindless swarm oblivious to his urgency. Under the navy suit and the starched shirt, he felt a river of sweat build momentum as it ran down his spine. The joints of his knees stung from the shock of the concrete. He elbowed forward between two anoraks, glancing over his shoulder.

No sign of her.

One of the anoraks yelled angrily. Performing a half turn in the air, he shouted an apology, though he didn't stop, volplaning down a flight of stairs and through the ticket gates. Heaving for air, he glanced around him. He was safely on the platform. Still no sign of the girl. Not that it mattered anymore. The train would arrive in - he checked the display - six minutes. He could have easily walked the last street and still have squeezed through the door before the whistle shrilled.

From his bag, he took out a handkerchief and mopped the sweat from his forehead. In the warmth of the bodies pressed around him, he felt the slippery film of sweat between his body and his clothes. Audibly, his pulse pounded in his ears, the only other sound the tinny echo of some teenager's earphones. The world was tinged green by the adrenalin rushing to his brain, the colour casting a sickly pall over the passengers.

Still got it. James Richards smiled as he pulled out the Sudoku puzzle from his satchel.

Of course, the whole thing was ridiculous; stupid male pride. She had started running first. That was when he realised he must be late. The two of them caught the same train every morning, not that they'd ever spoken. There were a lot of girls in their twenties, all with the

same plastic pass–cards around their necks or dangling from bags. He'd long ago theorized there must be a call–centre at the end of the road. As soon as she broke into a jog, he'd felt like he'd better run, too. He'd taken off at a sprint, passing her in the first fifty meters, only to realise the terrible problem he now faced. If he stopped, she'd think he was out of shape, that he'd been showing off when he overtook her. He'd started a weird competition. The further he ran, and the more persistently she kept pace behind him, the more certain he became she knew what he was thinking.

He let out a short chuckle at his own stupidity and the yawning chasm of awkwardness he was going to suffer every morning after this.

The train thundered in the distance, the screech of steel on steel echoing from the dark. He edged into position, weaving his way through the aroma of coffee and sweet pastries, years of practice telling him exactly where on the platform the doors of his preferred carriage would stop. Over the heads of the crowd he saw the pink hair and the black knitted cardigan. She'd made it. Well, good for her. For a moment, their gazes met. Her face lit up, smizing at him with impish eyes.

He turned away flustered. His wedding band seemed to grow heavy on his finger. He shook his head, but still couldn't resist looking back. That was when he witnessed it for the first time.

A middle–aged business woman in a smart gabardine coat and silk cravat was shuffling through the crowd, earphones in, her gaze locked on the screen of her smartphone. Her face was slack and expressionless as she walked towards the edge of the platform.

The rivets of the rails began to tremble. Tiny clouds of dust rose into the air. A scrap of newspaper was blown forward by the wind from the approaching train.

The girl with the pink hair noticed something. Her expression changed. She surged forward, elbowing people aside. Then she tried to snatch the mobile phone, but the woman wouldn't let her, screaming something incoherent as she elbowed the girl away.

«Hey!» His voice was surprisingly loud, but it paled against the clattering roar of the approaching train. They were too close to the edge. «Watch out!»

At the sound of his voice, the girl with the pink hair seemed to return to herself. Raising her hands she stepped back away from the woman.

Two lights blazed in the tunnel, turning the people on the platform into a wall of shadows. Without a trace of reaction the middle aged woman took two steps backwards and plunged over the edge of the platform. The fall happened in a dreadful instant, a

shadow passing in front of the lights.

The train thundered into the space. James stood dumbstruck as he struggled to accept what he'd seen.

Instantly a semicircle formed around the scene of death.

«Oh my god.» A whisper.

«Quick, get help.»

«What the hell happened?»

«She just walked off.»

James scanned the crowd, finding the pink hair vanishing up the south stairwell. Still trying to soothe the shock, he wriggled through the crowd, a lone ant travelling against an oceanic tide of onlookers drawn to the spectacle of a private tragedy. His legs brought him to the foot of the now empty stairs. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he clamped his eyes shut. He felt wired and shaky.

Pink had gone.

He stopped and tried to think rationally. There was no use staying here. He couldn't do anything to help that woman. No one could. And there was no way there was going to be another train for at least a couple of hours. Catching a bus was the only option at this point. Routine normality reasserted itself. He didn't have to think about the route. His job often involved overtime on Sundays, when the trains didn't run until ten o'clock. Habit guided him to the bus stop on autopilot.

Pink wasn't the kind of girl who snatched mobile phones.

That woman had been dumb–walking. She'd been so involved in her smartphone she hadn't realised she was walking too close to the platform edge. It wouldn't be the first time someone had caused an accident because they were engrossed in Facebook or Tinder or whatever it was people looked at these days. Pink had been trying to save her. That was the only logical explanation for what he'd witnessed. She'd seen the danger the woman was in, and tried to help, but it had backfired and the woman had fallen off the edge in the struggle. It was an accident.

The smell of cigarette smoke brought him back to himself. A teenager with undercut hair and a camouflage coat was smoking something he very much doubted was tobacco, the dense brownish cloud permeating the bus stop. James edged away, conscious the smell would be seeping into his suit.

«Excuse me.» James made eye contact. «Do you mind not?»

As the guy glared at him, James felt his hands shaking. Everyone at the bus stop, including James was shocked he'd said anything. The whole crowd was staring at them, the tension palpable. He knew they were all wondering why the hell he'd spoken out. It was the same question he was asking himself.

«Whatever mate," the teenager said, flicking the remnants of the spliff into the traffic. It sat there, still smoking, right in the middle of the lane where the passing cars wouldn't extinguish it by driving over the butt.

«Thanks," James muttered weakly, avoiding further eye–contact, grateful he hadn't been stabbed for his trouble.

The bus journey took an age, leaving James staring blankly out of the window at the endless sea of brake lights and unmoving scenery. Something wasn't right, and deep down he knew what was troubling him; she'd tried to snatch the phone.

If Pink had been trying to stop the woman walking off the platform, why hadn't she simply taken her elbow. That was what any normal person would have done. The lightest of physical contact would have been enough to get her attention, and then she could have warned the woman of the danger. But that wasn't what had happened.

The fear he'd seen on Pink's face was still etched in his memory. Of course, he'd yelled out and everyone had seen the scuffle. That was the simple explanation. He'd exposed a thief in the station, and she'd panicked. He rubbed a finger across his chin. It still didn't sit right in his gut. Pink wasn't like that. He didn't want to believe she was like that. Thinking back, Pink had looked terrified before he shouted at her. Her expression had changed the instant she'd seen the woman in the crowd, even before she was near the edge of the platform. And there was no mistaking that expression.

He'd only seen fear like that once before. It was one of those childhood memories that stuck. The room in the corner of the attic was technically a spare room, but it had slowly been taken over by clutter: The oriental fans from their trip to china, the old vacuum cleaner his father had promised to take to the charity shop, the surfboard that had been rashly purchased for his elder brother before he discovered he didn't like the sport, a heap of books his mother insisted didn't quite fit on the bookshelves in the living room. Normally, no one went in the spare room.

That day there was something else in the room. Something no one had put there; a pulsating beige mound, larger than James or his sister. It occupied almost the entire guest bed. Neither of them understood what the thing was at first. It was only after he'd reached out and touched the clay–like husk and felt the vibrating swarm within it, fear turned to horror. That was the moment he realised the truth.

Wasp nest.

His sister's face had been stony with terror. A single wasp was enough to make her scream. But this time she was silent. He ushered her out of the room, always keeping himself between her and the

mound.

The nightmares lasted for years. In his dreams, the wasps would build a nest around him as he slept. They'd crawl in his mouth and out through his eyes. And he'd wake screaming, cocooned in the nest where he slept, trapped in the writhing swarm.

He knew that facial expression because he'd seen it before on his sister's face. It wasn't concern he'd seen on the face of the pink haired girl. It was horror. For some reason she was absolutely terrified of that phone.

James reached into his bag and pulled out his Nokia 5110. His mobile phone must have been twenty years old. He'd had it since sixth form. It weighed about half a kilo and the screen was green and black. The thing was so old it had acquired a sort of retro cool. His friends joked he'd got there before the hipsters. He'd never really thought about it much, but he didn't like mobile phones. Of all his friends, he'd been the last to cave into the pressure to buy one. As a basic principle, when he went out, he liked to be out - as in out of reach of work, and insurance salesmen, and ex–girlfriends, and his mother complaining he never visited.

And he didn't upgrade. It certainly wasn't entirely displeasing to watch his friends suffer every time a new Apple iOS came out and took six hours to install. He struggled not to laugh when popular apps got hacked full of malware and stole people's credit card details, or their toddler fed their expensive mobile to the toilet bowl. And all the time his trusty Nokia did what he thought phones should do; make and receive calls. It certainly didn't lead people to walk in front of trains. He jokingly wondered if that was an app, or if it came pre–installed in the hardware.

Thinking about it, he realised he'd never seen a phone like that one before. It was an ugly thing, sort of rounded with a tiled skin - maybe an alligator skin carry case. Still, he wasn't likely to know what model it was. He didn't really pay much attention to the endless slew of slightly different models his friends insisted on demoing for him. Increasingly they seemed to be made somewhere in the Far East, with brand names he'd never heard of, by companies involved in endless patent disputes.

Alighting the bus near Holborn, the air felt doubly cold. The older buses vented engine heat directly around the passengers legs, adding the stench of diesel to what rapidly felt like a sauna. The shock of the change in temperature was brutal. Before he could break free of the throng and slip down the invariably empty ginnel which formed a short–cut to his office, a balding man sneezed furiously, pebble–dashing the back of James' neck with what he figured was probably SARS. Or maybe Ebola.

Cursing he rooted through his satchel and extracted the small bottle of antibacterial gel. He had to take off his wedding ring before applying some. There was a twinge of guilt as he slipped the ring into his pocket. Taking his ring off for a moment didn't mean anything. He'd only smiled at Pink. He was so preoccupied with his thoughts he didn't notice the thing as he boarded the lift. It was only when the elevator was half way between third and fourth he saw it.

He froze.

It was a smartphone in a black scaled case with small spikes. It was like the thing had followed him, sitting there like some kind of oversized slug that had oozed its way onto human skin. The finance–bro holding it was wired for sound, and James could hear the heavy bass of some trance, or techno or whatever they called that shit you had to be on drugs to enjoy.

Trying to be casual, James peeked over at the screen, trying to spot the logo of the brand, but he couldn't see anything. The cover was open, but the screen was a smooth black void. Abruptly, he realised Finance–bro was glaring at him.

«Nice phone," he coughed. Finance–bro blanked him. James wasn't sure that he could even hear with that music blaring. «I was thinking of getting one of those. What model is that?»

«Fuck off.» There was no intonation. The whole delivery was deadpan. And hostile.

«Sorry," James muttered. «I didn't mean to bother…» he didn't finish the sentence. His gaze was fixed on something strange. There was a drop of blood on the man's collar. It wasn't much. Probably just a nick from shaving. Or maybe it was splatter from the hobo he'd beaten to death. The guy had a serious Patrick Bateman vibe. The stain stood out against the immaculately starched white. «Just ignore me.»

James turned to face the doors, edging a step away. He wasn't scared of this guy, or at least, that wasn't why he turned away. He was beginning to feel queasy. The whole morning had been unsettling. The lift carried on up in silence, only the two of them in the confined space. Sticking to the dice principle – that all passengers in a lift maintain the maximum space between them by forming a pattern like the dots on a dice – he edged into the front corner. He could feel the back of his neck burning. When it finally reached the thirteenth floor, James dived out of the elevator, glancing behind him as he hurried down the corridor.

Ensconced in his cubicle, a soothing cup of Ceylon tea steaming on the desk, he checked the news websites to see if the accident at the train station had made the local section. As expected, the article was only a couple of hundred words long. The authorities were blaming

the incident on 'dumb–walking'. The journalist had linked the death to some recently published statistics about the number of road accidents in which mobile phone use was considered a contributory factor, along with a call for greater awareness among the general public of the risks of using mobile phones when on the move. There was no mention of the altercation with the pink–haired girl.

The whole thing didn't sit right with him, but he pushed it out of mind and focused on his work.

* * *

At precisely six–thirty, he removed the marinated lamb from the refrigerator and browned it in a skillet with the onions. Once this step was complete, he combined it with olives, chickpeas, dried apricots and raisins, along with a mixture of chilli, cumin seeds and cinnamon, before slow cooking in vegetable stock for two hours.

While the stew heated through, he went to his bedroom mantelpiece and lit the incense in front of the picture of his wife. He rang the bell, clapping once before his prayer, and twice after. The ritual was more of a coping mechanism than a religious belief. It was just what he did to get by each day.

He worked out for an hour to fight off the silence of the house, then took a shower, emerging just in time to take the stew off the heat and let the meat rest while he steamed some vegetables.

The nine o'clock news featured a six car pileup on the M25 North. Police were investigating reports the lorry driver responsible had been using a mobile phone while in control of the vehicle. Smart phones, dumb people, he thought, bitterly.

The driver that killed his wife had died in the collision. The police had held the driver criminally responsible, but in the light of his death, nothing had gone to court. The insurance people had paid up based on the police report. It hadn't mentioned anything about a phone. At the back of his mind, James couldn't help but wonder. Not that it made any difference now. Lauren was gone.

He watched a ten o'clock comedy program to kill the emptiness, then rolled into his bed, ready to do it all again from the beginning.

* * *

The pink haired girl wasn't at the station for the next couple of days. Not that this was unusual. Most mornings they boarded the same train, but the station was crowded and sometimes he didn't see her for

a couple of weeks. In all honesty, it was a relief she wasn't there. Things would have been awkward, and he didn't want there to be a thing hanging in the air every time he saw her. It would all blow–over in a couple of weeks, and they'd go back to being two people living parallel lives. There was no need for him to even think about her.

Smartphone spotting became a little way to squash free time. He was determined not to let it become an obsession, but he couldn't help noticing them in a way he'd never done before. What struck him most was the sheer number of phones he saw every day. It was by no means unusual for people to have two. A lot of people had a work mobile and a personal mobile, and kids often had more than one, though he suspected the second ones were old units repurposed as games devices and music players. There was also an immense variety of devices and accessories in the market. Oversized earphones and giant fat–ass screens seemed to be the popular. What he didn't see was any more of was the scaled black phones with the barbed wire headphones. He even Googled for phone catalogues and images to find the brand, yet he couldn't get them anywhere. There were simply too many types of phone. It wasn't so much a needle in a haystack as a phone in an immense stack of phones.

By the third morning he'd put it out of his mind. It was raining, so the train was crammed to Third—World levels with people sitting in the luggage racks, yet clutching his satchel he forced his way down the aisle. He hadn't seen Pink or Finance–bro since the day of the accident. He figured the sociopath in the suit was probably rearranging a freezer full of prostitute heads or drowning kittens in a sack. He didn’t care what Finance–bro was doing with himself, but Pink's absence worried him. He didn't need to talk to her about what happened. All he needed to do was see her, and make sure she was okay. For some reason he felt like she was in danger.

Squeezing through the swaying seaweed of people, he moved through the doors and into the next carriage. Still no sign of her. It was possible she was catching an earlier train in an active effort to avoid seeing him. The thought made him feel strangely lonely. The train was silent, most of the passengers buried in their phones, lines of glowing screens casting a pale blue glow on their faces as the train lights flickered in the tunnel. Nearly all of them had a camera on the back, facing out into the carriage. Maybe it was the heat of the train, but he began to feel queasy under the glare of the lenses.

Blue sparks flashed in the darkness and the train shuddered, the carriage briefly falling into darkness as they passed over a set of points. He felt the shift of gravity, the bodies pressed around him abruptly opening into space sending him toppling towards the

window. Arm reached high, he braced himself against the luggage rack nearly falling on top of a bleached–blonde schoolgirl with a micro skirt and oversized necktie. Over the rim of her smartphone she glowered at him.

He was about to apologise when he noticed the black alligator skin case. Those phones were creepy. That was the first time he really felt it. The thing sat in her hands like some kind of huge black slug, its tendrils stretching up into her ears. No, he thought, not a slug. A wasp nest.

He tried to swallow with a dry mouth. «Sorry," he attempted a smile.

The girl raised an eyebrow. «It's alright.»

«Cool phone," he offered. Suspicion flashed across her face. She probably thought he was a paedophile. «I was thinking of getting one for my daughter's birthday. Do you know where I can get one of those?»

It was a pathetic lie. He could tell she didn't believe him. Palpably, a tiny pulse throbbed in his neck. His shirt collar felt tight. And yet he couldn't take his eyes off the phone. It was almost as if he could feel it staring back at him, the camera lens forming a single eye in the middle of its head.

Then suddenly his blood ran cold.

It blinked.

He staggered back, crashing into a copy of the Financial Times. The paper collapsed on impact, crumpling in on itself as he fell into the lap of a red–faced man.

«Bloody idiot! Look where you're going.»

The girl with the phone was glaring at him, her face slack, her eyes dead. From her ear a single drop of dark red blood rolled down into her shirt collar. In his head the image of the wasp nest formed again. He could feel it clamping around his chest, choking him. Jerking to his feet, he pushed his way down the aisle, slowly at first, but then elbowing people out of his way. Oily sweat gushed out of his pores. His stomach was turning over.

Around him, passengers shuffled towards the exit, clearing space. With a flash, the train burst out into the light of the first stop. He was aware of the bodies flowing around him as people maneuvered out onto the platform. Darting after them, he jumped down, parting the crowd of people waiting to board.

Clutching his bag tight against his chest, he leaned against the wall of the platform, then slowly slid down into a ball. He clamped his eyes shut. It wasn't possible. There was no way that was real. His body trembled with a febrile shock. He grasped the satchel ever more tightly, rolling on his heels, trying to soothe the panic.

«Are you okay?» It was a woman's voice.

James blinked open his eyes to see her delicate face framed by her long pink hair, her eyes smiling at him sadly. His brain stalled. The silence between them drowned out the noise of the station. When he finally spoke, his throat was dry and cracked. «That wasn't a phone.»

He was sure she'd think he was insane. He'd been living alone for too long. His hand was shaking uncontrollably as he reached his hand out and touched her face. He needed this. She pressed his hand against her cheek.

She shook her head slowly. «They know who you are now.»

paulalexgray Infusion

At the magistrate's command the silver walls shimmered and shifted. The translucent intellipolymer glass revealed a sweeping vista. Light spilled over the robotic assistants that swarmed around the client. Morgan Velt nodded his grizzled head and croaked a comment.

«At my first infusion this planet was a wasteland. And now look at it! Glory be to the human race.»

«You have created a paradise for our people.» Said the magistrate as he adjusted the controls.

A doorway opened and the clone was brought in. Naked and trembling he was half dragged by two guards. Blood dripped from his nose and his left eye was swollen and blackened. The magistrate gasped in surprise.

«What is this?» He shouted.

«Infusee put up a fight your honour. Had to subdue him.»

«This is an outrage!» Hacked Morgan as a robot wiped blood from his lips. «My new body should be pristine, not beaten like a dog.»

The clone stood and stared out to the room. Through his one good eye he marvelled at the sunlight outside, the first he had ever seen. Until now his existence had been in the depths of the building. Each day filled with demanding physical rigour designed to condition his body to the strongest possible level. And now, the clone knew his time was coming to an end. Today was his infusion, where his life would end and where the client's would begin anew.

The doctor beckoned to the medbed beside Morgan's. Above the jagged looking stamen of the Infusion device hung, a cable riddled needle that would at once wipe his consciousness from his mind and infuse the soul of Morgan.

«Magnificent.» Said Morgan and the clone looked to him. He recognised himself in the withered face. A reflection through time.

«Well done magistrate. The specimen is perfect. Even if your guards were over zealous.»

«We aim to please. We shall begin. We look forward to welcoming you into your new body.»

«Excellent.» He chuckled. «I look forward to celebrating my five hundredth. In this form I'll be able to enjoy it a lot more!»

The guards moved the clone forward, one of them barking a harsh command.

Outside in the sky above the clone watched for the sign. The clouds broiled and then he saw it. A streak of light and then a flash burnt high above.

In the room machines hummed into activity and pulsed with

energy. As the guards unlocked his enerbinds the clone pretended to fall but spun around grabbing a scalpel with one hand and kicking the table up into one guard's face.

The clone leapt up and smashed his two hundred pounds of muscle into the guard who crumpled against the wall. As the second reached for his stunblade the clone swung out with the scalpel slitting his throat and sending a shower of blood out onto Morgan.

Alarm bells rang and the magistrate yelled for the clone to stop. The clone ran quickly up the stairs and threw the magistrate to the ground below with a sickening crunch.

Morgan screamed as the window exploded. Outside the fastship had used its cannon to blast a hole in the glass. Wind roared in and a doorway opened in the ship's side.

The clone watched in awe as his rescuers beckoned.

Morgan's voice hissed out. «Such insolence! You were made, not born. You have no freedom, no life. No soul. You are my vessel made anew!» He coughed and more blood spilled. «And you dare to defy us? We shall destroy you. All of you!»

The figure in the ship beckoned, making an urgent sign with his hands. The clone knew that the sentinels would soon rush in.

Walking to the old man, the clone tilted his head and reached out. With one hand he tenderly wiped the blood from the man's lips.

«Your time has been long and rich» intoned the clone «but you are well overdue.»

Raising his fist high the clone smashed it into Morgan's chest feeling the brittle bones snap. The old man cried out in pain.

The heartbeat indicator began to spike erratically. With a smile the clone ran and leapt into the waiting fastship. As the sentinels burst in the fastship soared away, a flare of light in the morning sky.

PaulLev Synchronicity

It's been this way all of my life. Like when I was in high school, and we'd be reading our homework assignments out loud, and some kid would stand up right before me and read pretty much what I had written. Not that he'd cheated or anything. I never showed my work to anyone. And yet he'd written my ideas, even using my words. I had a hard time proving that I wasn't the cheat. «Great minds think alike," the more enlightened among my teachers would say. But that was too pat. I knew something else was going on-I just didn't know what.

It happened on the radio, too. I'd be singing a song, driving somewhere, and I turn on the radio and that very same song was playing. Yeah, I know that they played the Beatles a lot back then - still do on the oldies stations I listen to - but I mean, the Beatles have a pretty big catalog. What was the likelihood that «Dr. Robert» was on the radio right after I'd been singing it?

When I got to college and grad school, I began to search for similar patterns in history. There were plenty. Alexander Graham Bell and Elisha Gray invented the telephone, independently, at the same time. Pretty much the same for motion pictures - invented independently by Edison in the U. S., Friese—Greene in England, and the Lumiere Bros in Paris. And of course Wallace came up with a theory of natural selection all on his own, at the same time as Darwin.

I was starting to put together a dissertation proposal on this very topic, when I came across an article published in an obscure journal — «On the Ubiquity of Independent, Simultaneous Invention.» I was crushed, but not really surprised. I left the doctoral program and took a job in my uncle's shoe store-I was in de feet, ha ha.

It was not that bad, though. I had no talent for shoe sales, so I wasn't vulnerable to the trauma of someone else coming up with my ideas. No danger of someone stealing my notion of a better display case, because I wouldn't have had that dumb idea in the first place. That was a relief. I went along like that for a good few years.

But the job also gave me lots of time to think and look around the Internet on my iPhone when there were no customers in the store. I began looking into quantum mechanics. Some scientists thought that just thinking about subatomic things was enough to affect them, and our mentalities might actually be in touch in some way with the past and the future, through some kind of time–unified quantum mechanical field. Maybe I and all the people who seemed to co–opt my ideas were connected to some future Omega point, the Platonic source of all ideas!

And sure enough, a few hours after I came up with that

hypothesis, I found a book on Amazon on the exact same topic by some physicist I'd never heard of.

No problem. I should have known. Better to sell shoes. Yes, ma'am, we do have that style, and right in your size.

But the urge to break out of this is still strong, and I recently came up with another plan. Science fiction. Maybe if I presented what I know about this synchronicity not in a science book, but in a little science fiction story published somewhere online, it would slip under the radar. If it was not known in the future, maybe the quantum mechanical effect would keep it unknown to anyone but me until after it was published now, in the present. Lots of big ideas began with science fiction - Asimov and his robots, Verne and his submarines and rockets to the moon, right?

But I would have to be careful. Better not to think about this story too much, lest it make the synchronic leap. Better just write it and send it out.

(Sigh) And I just read what you are reading. The very same story. My story. Hopeless case….

> Synchronicity was first published in BuzzyMag, 25 April 2014, and is one of many stories Paul Levinson has had published. Paul is Professor of Communication & Media Studies at Fordham University in NYC. His science fiction novels include The Silk Code (winner of Locus Award for Best First Science Fiction Novel of 1999, author's cut ebook 2012), Borrowed Tides (2001), The Consciousness Plague (2002, 2013), The Pixel Eye (2003), The Plot To Save Socrates (2006, 2012), Unburning Alexandria (2013), and Chronica (2014) — the last three of which are historical as well as science fiction, and are known as the Sierra Waters trilogy. You can find more of his work on his profile @PaulLev.

NancyFulda Movement

It is sunset. The sky is splendid through the panes of my bedroom window; billowing layers of cumulus blazing with refracted oranges and reds. I think if only it weren't for the glass, I could reach out and touch the cloudscape, perhaps leave my own trail of turbulence in the swirling patterns that will soon deepen to indigo.

But the window is there, and I feel trapped.

Behind me my parents and a specialist from the neurological research institute are sitting on folding chairs they've brought in from the kitchen, quietly discussing my future. They do not know I am listening. They think that, because I do not choose to respond, I do not notice they are there.

«Would there be side effects?» My father asks. In the oppressive heat of the evening, I hear the quiet Zzzap of his shoulder laser as it targets mosquitoes. The device is not as effective as it was two years ago: the mosquitoes are getting faster.

My father is a believer in technology, and that is why he contacted the research institute. He wants to fix me. He is certain there is a way.

«There would be no side effects in the traditional sense," the specialist says. I like him even though his presence makes me uncomfortable. He chooses his words very precisely. «We're talking about direct synaptic grafting, not drugs. The process is akin to bending a sapling to influence the shape of the grown tree. We boost the strength of key dendritic connections and allow brain development to continue naturally. Young neurons are very malleable.»

«And you've done this before?» I do not have to look to know my mother is frowning. My mother does not trust technology. She has spent the last ten years trying to coax me into social behavior by gentler means. She loves me, but she does not understand me. She thinks I cannot be happy unless I am smiling and laughing and running along the beach with other teenagers.

«The procedure is still new, but our first subject was a young woman about the same age as your daughter. Afterwards, she integrated wonderfully. She was never an exceptional student, but she began speaking more and had an easier time following classroom procedure.»

«What about Hannah's… talents?» my mother asks. I know she is thinking about my dancing; also the way I remember facts and numbers without trying. «Would she lose those?»

The specialist's voice is very firm, and I like the way he delivers the facts without trying to cushion them. «It's a matter of trade–offs,

Mrs. Didier. The brain cannot be optimized for everything at once. Without treatment, some children like Hannah develop into extraordinary individuals. They become famous, change the world, learn to integrate their abilities into the structures of society. But only a very few are that lucky. The others never learn to make friends, hold a job, or live outside of institutions.»

«And… with treatment?»

«I cannot promise anything, but the chances are very good that Hannah will lead a normal life.»I have pressed my hand to the window. The glass feels cold and smooth beneath my palm. It appears motionless although I know at the molecular level it is flowing. Its atoms slide past each other slowly, so slowly; a transformation no less inevitable for its tempo. I like glass – also stone – because it does not change very quickly. I will be dead, and so will all of my relatives and their descendants, before the deformations will be visible without a microscope.

I feel my mother's hands on my shoulders. She has come up behind me and now she turns me so that I must either look in her eyes or pull away. I look in her eyes because I love her and because I am calm enough right now to handle it. She speaks softly and slowly.

«Would you like that, Hannah? Would you like to be more like other teenagers?»Neither yes nor no seems appropriate, so I do not say anything. Words are such fleeting, indefinite things. They slip through the spaces between my thoughts and are lost.

She keeps looking at me, and I consider giving her an answer I've been saving. Two weeks ago she asked me whether I would like a new pair of dancing shoes and if so, what color. I have collected the proper words in my mind, smooth and firm like pebbles, but I decide it is not worth speaking them. Usually by the time I answer a question, people have forgotten that they asked it.

The word they have made for my condition is temporal autism. I do not like it, both because it is a word and because I am not certain I have anything in common with autists beyond a disinclination for speech.

They are right about the temporal part, though.

My mother waits twelve–point–five seconds before releasing my shoulders and returning to sit on the folding chair. I can tell she is unhappy with me, so I climb down from the window ledge and reach for the paper sack I keep tucked under my bed. The handles are made of twine, rough and real against my fingers. I press the sack to my chest and slip past the people conversing in my bedroom. Downstairs I open the front door and stare into the breathtaking sky. I know I am not supposed to leave the house on my own, but I do not want to stay inside, either. Above me the heavens are moving. The clouds swirl like

leaves in a hurricane: billowing, vanishing, tumbling apart and restructuring themselves; a lethargic yet incontrovertible chaos.

I can almost feel the earth spinning beneath my feet. I am hurtling through space, a speck too small to resist the immensity of the forces that surround me. I tighten my fingers around the twine handles of the sack to keep myself from spinning away into the stratosphere. I wonder what it's like to be cheerfully oblivious of the way time shapes our existence. I wonder what it's like to be like everyone else.

* * *

I am under the brilliant sky now, the thick paper of the sack crackling as it swings against my legs. I am holding the handles so tightly that the twine bites into my fingers.

At my feet the flytraps are opening, their spiny blossoms stretching upwards from chips and cracks in the pavement. They are a domestic variety gone wild, and they are thriving in the nurturing environment provided by this part of town. Our street hosts a flurry of sidewalk cafes, and the fist–sized blossoms open every evening to snare crumbs of baguettes or sausage fragments carried by the wind from nearby tables.

The flytraps make me nervous, although I doubt I could communicate to anyone why this is so. They feel very much like the clouds that stream overhead in glowing shades of orange and amber: always changing, always taking on new forms.

The plants have even outgrown their own name. They seldom feed on flies anymore. The game of out–evolving prey has become unrewarding, and so they have learned to survive by seeming pleasant to humanity. The speckled patterns along the blossoms grow more intricate each year. The spines snap closed so dramatically when a bit of protein or carbohydrate falls within their grasp that children giggle and hasten to fetch more.

One flytrap, in particular, catches my attention. It has a magnificent blossom, larger and more colorful than any I have seen before, but the ordinary stem is too spindly to support this innovation. The blossom lies crushed against the sidewalk, overshadowed by the smaller, sturdier plants that crowd above it.

It is a critical juncture in the evolutionary chain, and I want to watch and see whether the plant will live to pass on its genes. Although the flytraps as a whole disquiet me, this single plant is comforting. It is like the space between one section of music and another; something is about to happen, but no one knows exactly

what. The plant may quietly extinguish, or it may live to spawn the next generation of flytraps; a generation more uniquely suited to survival than any that has come before.

I want the flytrap to survive, but I can tell from the sickly color of its leaves that this is unlikely. I wonder, if the plant had been offered the certainty of mediocrity rather than the chance of greatness, would it have accepted?

I start walking again because I am afraid I will start crying. I am too young. It is not fair to ask me to make such a decision. It is also not fair if someone else makes it for me.

I do not know what I should want.

* * *

The old cathedral, when it appears at the end of the avenue, soothes me. It is like a stone in the midst of a swirling river, worn smooth at the edges but mostly immune to time's capricious currents. Looking at it makes me think of Daniel Tammet. Tammet was an autistic savant in the twenty–first century who recognized every prime from 2 to 9,973 by the pebble–like quality they elicited in his mind. Historical architecture feels to me the way I think Tammet's primes must have felt to him.

The priest inside the building greets me kindly, but does not expect a response. He is used to me, and I am comfortable with him. He does not demand that I waste my effort on fleeting things – pointless things – like specks of conversation that are swept away by the great rush of time without leaving any lasting impact. I slip past him into the empty room where the colored windows cast shadows of light on the walls.

My footsteps echo as I pass through the doorway, and I feel suddenly alone.

I know that there are other people like me, most of them from the same ethnic background, which implies we are the result of a recent mutation. I have never asked to meet them. It has not seemed important. Now, as I sit against the dusty walls and remove my street shoes, I think maybe that has been a mistake.

The paper sack rustles as I pull from it a pair of dancing slippers. They are pointe shoes, reinforced for a type of dancing that human anatomy cannot achieve on its own. I slide my feet into position along the shank, my toes nestling into the familiar shape of the toe box. I wrap the ribbons carefully, making sure my foot is properly supported.

Other people do not see the shoes the same way I do. They see

only the faded satin, battered so much that it has grown threadbare, and the rough wood of the toe box where it juts through the gaps. They do not see how the worn leather has matched itself to the shape of my foot. They do not know what it is like to dance in shoes that feel like a part of your body.

I begin to warm my muscles, keenly aware of the paths the shadows trace along the walls as sunset fades into darkness. When I have finished the last of my pliés and jetés, stars glimmer through the colored glass of the windows, dizzying me with their progress. I am hurtling through space, part of a solar system flung towards the outer rim of its galaxy. It is difficult to breathe. Often, when the flow of time becomes too strong, I crawl into the dark space beneath my bed and run my fingers along the rough stones and jagged glass fragments that I have collected there. But today the pointe shoes are connecting me to the ground. I move to the center of the room, rise to full pointe…

And wait.

Time stretches and spins like molasses, pulling me in all directions at once. I am like the silence between one movement of music and the next, like a water droplet trapped halfway down a waterfall that stands frozen in time. Forces press against me, churning, swirling, roaring with the sound of reality changing. I hear my heart beating in the empty chamber. I wonder if this is how Daniel Tammet felt when he contemplated infinity.

Finally I find it; the pattern in the chaos. It is not music, precisely, but it is very like it. It unlocks the terror that has tightened my muscles and I am no longer a mote in a hurricane. I am the hurricane itself. My feet stir up dust along the floor. My body moves in concordance with my will. There are no words here. There is only me and the motion, whirling in patterns as complex as they are inconstant.

Life is not the only thing that evolves. My dancing changes every day, sometimes every second, each sequence repeating or extinguishing based on how well it pleases me. At a higher level in the fractal, forms of dance also mutate and die. People call ballet a timeless art, but the dance performed in modern theatres is very different from the ballet that originally emerged in Italy and France.

Mine is an endangered species in the performance hierarchy; a neoclassical variant that no one remembers, no one pays to watch, and only a few small groups of dancers ever mimic. It is solitary, beautiful, and doomed to destruction. I love it because its fate is certain. Time has no more hold on it.

When my muscles lose their strength I will relinquish the illusion of control and return to being yet another particle in the rushing chaos of the universe, a spectator to my own existence. But for now I

am aware of nothing except my own movement and the energy rushing through my blood vessels. Were it not for physical limitations, I would keep dancing forever.

* * *

My brother is the one who finds me. He has often brought me here and waits with electronics flickering at his temples while I dance. I like my brother. I feel comfortable with him because he does not expect me to be anything other than what I am.

By the time I have knelt to unlace my dance shoes my parents have arrived also. They are not calm and quiet like my brother. They are sweaty from the night air and speak in tense sentences that all jumble on top of each other. If they would bother to wait I might find words to soothe their frantic babble. But they do not know how to speak on my time scale. Their conversations are paced in seconds, sometimes in minutes. It is like the buzzing of mosquitoes in my ears. I need days, sometimes weeks to sort my thoughts and find the perfect answer.

My mother is close to my face and seems distressed. I try to calm her with the answer I've been saving.

«No new shoes," I say. «I couldn't dance the same in new shoes.»

I can tell that these are not the words she was looking for, but she has stopped scolding me for leaving the house unaccompanied.

My father is also angry. Or perhaps he is afraid. His voice is too loud for me, and I tighten my fingers around the paper sack in my hands.

«Stars above, Hannah, do you have any idea how long we've been looking for you? Gina, we're going to have to do something soon. She might have wandered into the Red District, or been hit by a car, or—"

«I don't want to be rushed into this!» Mother's voice is angry. «Dr. Renoit is starting a new therapy group next month. We should—"

«I don't know why you're so stubborn about this. We're not talking about drugs or surgery. It's a simple, noninvasive procedure.»

«One that hasn't been tested yet! We've been seeing progress with the ABA program. I'm not willing to throw that away just because…»

I hear the Zzzap of father's shoulder laser. Because I have not heard the whine of a mosquito, I know that it has targeted a spec of dust. This does not surprise me. In the years since father bought the laser the mosquitoes have changed, but the dust is the same as it was millennia ago.

A moment later I hear mother swear and swat at her shirt. The mosquito whizzes past my ear as it escapes. I have been keeping track

of the statistics over the years. Mother's traditional approach to mosquitoes is no more effective than Father's hi–tech solution.

* * *

My brother takes me home while my parents argue about the future. I sit in his room while he lies down and activates the implants at his temples. Pinpricks of light gleam across his forehead, flickering because he's connected to the Vastness. His mind is wide, now. Wide and broadening; horizons without end. Each pulse of his neurons flares across the thoughtnets to stimulate the neurons of others, just as theirs are stimulating his.

Forty minutes later my grandparents pause by the open doorway. My grandparents do not understand the Vastness. They do not know that the drool pools at his cheek because it is hard to perceive the faint messages from the body when the mind is ablaze with stimuli. They see the slackness of his face, the glassy eyes staring upwards, and they know only that he is far away from us, gone somewhere they cannot follow, and that they think must be evil.

«It isn't right," they mutter, «letting the mind decay like that. His parents shouldn't let him spend so much time on that thing.»

«Remember how it was when we were young? The way we'd all crowd around the same game console? Everyone in the same room. Everyone seeing the same screen. Now that was bonding. That was healthy entertainment.»

They shake their heads. «It's a shame young people don't know how to connect with each other anymore.»

I do not want to listen to them talk, so I stand up and close the door in their faces. I know they will consider the action unprovoked, but I do not care. They know the words for temporal autism, but they do not understand what it means. Deep inside, they still believe that I am just bad mannered.

Faintly, beyond the door, I hear them telling each other how different young people are from the way they used to be. Their frustration mystifies me. I do not understand why old people expect the younger generations to hold still, why they think, in a world so full of tumult, children should play the same games their grandparents did.

I watch the lights flare at my brother's temples, a stochastic pattern that reminds me of the birth and death of suns. Right now, he is using a higher percentage of his neural tissue than anyone born a hundred years ago could conceive of. He is communicating with more people than my father has met in his entire lifetime.

How was it, I wonder, when Homo habilis first uttered the noises that would lead to modern language? Were those odd–sounding infants considered defective, asocial, unsuitable to interact with their peers? How many genetic variations bordered on language before one found enough acceptance to perpetuate?

My grandparents say the Vastness is distorting my brother's mind, but I think it is really the opposite. His mind is built to seek out the Vastness, just like mine is attuned to the dizzying flow of seconds and centuries.

* * *

Night collides into morning, and somewhere along the way I fall asleep. When I wake the sky beyond my brother's window is bright with sunlight. If I bring my face close to the glass, I can just see the flytrap with the magnificent blossom and the crumpled stem. It is too early to tell whether it will survive the day.

Outside the neighbors greet each other; the elderly with polite nods or handshakes, the teenagers with shouts and gestured slang. I wonder which of the new greetings used this morning will entrench themselves into the vocabulary of tomorrow.

Social structures follow their own path of evolution – variations infinitely emerging, competing, and fading into the tumult. The cathedral at the end of our street will one day host humans speaking a different language, with entirely different customs than ours.

Everything changes. Everything is always changing. To me, the process is very much like waves hitting the tidal rocks: Churn, swirl, splash, churn… Chaos, inevitable in its consistency.

It should not be surprising that, on the way from what we are to what we are becoming, there should be friction and false starts along the way. Noise is intrinsic to change. Progression is inherently chaotic.

Mother calls me for breakfast, then attempts to make conversation while I eat my buttered toast. She thinks that I do not answer because I haven't heard her, or perhaps because I do not care. But it's not that. I'm like my brother when he's connected to the Vastness. How can I play the game of dredging up memorized answers to questions that have no meaning when the world is changing so rapidly? The heavens stream past outside the windows, the crustal plates are shifting beneath my feet. Everything around me is either growing or falling apart. Words feel flat and insignificant by comparison.

Mother and father have avoided discussing synaptic grafting with each other all morning, a clear indication that their communication

strategies must once again evolve. Their conversations about me have always been strained. Disputed phrases have died out of our family vocabulary, and my parents must constantly invent new ones to fill the gaps.

I am evolving too, in my own small way. Connections within my brain are forming, surviving, and perishing, and with each choice I make I alter the genotype of my soul. This is the thing, I think, that my parents most fail to see. I am not static, no more than the large glass window that lights the breakfast table. Day by day I am learning to mold myself to a world that does not welcome me.

I press my hands to the window and feel its cool smoothness beneath my skin. If I close my eyes I can almost feel the molecules shifting. Let it continue long enough, and the pane will someday find its own shape, one constrained not by the hand of humans but by the laws of the universe, and by its own nature.

I find that I have decided something.

I do not want to live small. I do not want to be like everyone else, ignorant of the great rush of time, trapped in frantic racing sentences. I want something else, something that I cannot find a word for.

I pull on mother's arm and tap at the glass, to show her that I am fluid inside. As usual, she does not understand what I am trying to tell her. I would like to clarify, but I cannot find the way. I pull my ballet slippers from the rustling paper bag and place them on top of the information packet left by the neuroscientist.

«I do not want new shoes," I say. «I do not want new shoes.»

This story was originally published in the March 2011 issue of Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, and was written by Nancy Fulda, a past Hugo and Nebula nominee, a Vera Hinckley Mayhew Award recipient, and a Jim Baen Memorial Award winner. Nancy holds a Masters Degree in computer science and has stories forthcoming in anthologies from BAEN and TOR.

RachelAukes The Gao Yao Engine

The guard handed me a manila envelope containing my wallet and watch and handed me a bag of brown pill bottles. «Instructions are in the bag. Follow them or else you'll regret it. Your eighty–year sentence is complete. You're free to go," he said and pointed at the door. My shoes squeaked on the linoleum as I walked across the floor. My muscles spasmed just before I stepped outside and shaded my eyes against the day's bright light. The sun looked no different than the day I went in. But that was eighty years ago.

It was also today.

My clothes still fit. I looked the same. Yet, in my mind, eighty years had passed.

They called it the Gao Yao Engine and it today's most advanced biotechnology. Induced time manipulation. The Chinese had come up with the idea. They designed the system to save money and turn criminals into productive citizens. All the old prisons were eliminated. The Gao Yao Engine powered an entirely new worldwide prison system.

Drugs, nothing like the methamphetamine that got me in here in the first place, had slowed my mind down while the doctors uploaded their own «corrective» programming. It had felt like I served an eighty year term. But, I'd been in prison for only three hours.

By year twelve, things had gotten rough. I'd wanted to die, begged them to let me die, but they'd ignored me. Just kept pumping the drugs through my system. By year sixty, I had arthritis so bad that waking up was a daily lesson in misery. By year seventy, cataracts had clouded my vision, preventing me from reading, which had been the one thing that had kept me sane.

And, I woke up to find that none of it had been real.

Phantom pains echoed in my joints. Everything I looked at was in exaggerated colors. A headache throbbed behind my eyes. Another spasm racked my muscles. They'd said muscular anxiety would be a possible long term side effect. I climbed into the waiting taxi.

«312 Eisenhower Street," I said before rifling through the plastic bag. I didn't bother reading the dosage instructions. I opened each of the three pill bottles and popped the drug cocktail intended to keep Gao candidates from losing it once they were tossed back into the real world. I leaned back and felt the pills work their magic.

I sensed someone watching me and I opened my eyes. «What?» I growled.

«Is the Gao treatment as bad as they say?» the driver asked.

I closed my eyes again. «Yeah. It's bad.»

«I have a nephew that's had a couple brushes with the law. I keep telling him he's got to behave or else they'll Gao him. But he don't listen. He's young and stupid. What'd you get caught for?»

«Possession of illegal substances," I replied.

The driver continued. «So does it work? They say you can't go near crime without getting sick. That true?»

«I haven't had a chance to find out yet.»

The interminably long ride ended with the driver still asking questions like he was Anderson Cooper. I didn't leave him a tip and headed into my dump of a house. I half–expected to see everything covered in years of dust and my goldfish floating corpses, but the house was exactly as I'd left it this morning.

I headed straight for the drawer with the hidden back and reached for my stash. As soon as my fingers touched the plastic, a wave of nausea swept over me. I tried again and found myself lurching to the sink to puke.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand before laughing uncontrollably and without humor. They'd really done it. I was still me, but they were in my head, too, and I hated them for it.

Slamming the drawer closed, I headed outside and to the bar.

* * *

It took me three months to adjust to having two realities shoved into my brain. I learned what I could control and what the Gao programming controlled. I turned in my best friend, the neighborhood's biggest drug dealer, to the cops two weeks after I was Gao'd. Things got a bit easier each day after that.

«What do you want me to do with this punk?»

I cracked my neck from side to side before examining the man bleeding on my floor. Two of my henchmen held him to keep him from collapsing. If he was conscious, he showed no signs.

«Put a bullet in his head," I said. «And leave his body out for his friends to find him first.» I took a step closer, careful not to touch him or risk the Gao nausea. «No one sells drugs in my neighborhood. No one except me.»

I motioned to my boys to take him away, and I looked through my office window to watch the manufacturing line below. A muscle spasm shot through my body, but I was used to it. Instead, I smiled. My empire was growing.

I couldn't touch drugs after I'd been Gao'd, and that helped me keep my head on straight. I couldn't get my hands dirty, and that kept me off the cops' radar. I'd always known I could run the business

twice as good as my old buddy could. He enjoyed sampling his own stuff too much, and without the Gao programming, I would've been just like him.

No, I knew I could do it better than he'd done. I'd just needed to a plan, and that was easy enough. After all, I'd had eighty years to work out the details.

This wonderful short was written by Wattpadder RachelAukes, writer of 100 Days in Deadland and various other fantastic stories.

Reginac7 Somewhere Else

«You're an expert dreamer. There’s nothing to worry about.»

Melanie Five was an optimist. A calculating one. She expected her programs would work. A game, she called it.

I spent my days anticipating the fear that would grab at me when she arrived in the lab and sent us to sleep. Yet I wondered if it was the open–ended aspect of it all that was the real terror. She gave me freedom to go where I wanted but I didn't know how to stop once I was speeding along. Time emerged like a child’s tower of blocks, collapsing as I passed by.

The smallest planet always appeared first. I covered its circumference in two, no, three steps. I felt like a giant walking across the brown and gray rock. Around me in my dream’s eye I saw the emptiness, the black night, galaxies in the distance coming toward me or expanding away.

It was the largest planet, though, that made me sense something hidden and waiting. I struggled to penetrate down to its surface but dense clouds stopped me.

«Do you still dream?» I asked Melanie Five once.

«Of course not!» she said. «I stopped that long ago. I have other work now. I am developing a new game, in fact, that will reproduce my earliest years. It should turn out to be great fun.»

Her reputation was flawless, over a million dreams that she had experienced and recorded. Part of our training was to live in her image.

«A dream is a fabrication, no more than the firing of synaptic charges. The game is meant to help you know who you are in physical space. You need to put your faith in what you can experience in the dreams and bring that confidence into real life.»

I told her I didn’t understand.

«You know, Thelonious, if you insist on challenging my methods, one night I might forget to retrieve you from the dream at all. Now, I know you don’t want that!» She smiled and pretended to laugh. «You love the freedom your body has in the dream. That's the point of it! Relax. Go to sleep. I’ll take care of you.»

Her reassurances were hollow. She wasn’t there to take care of any of us with our problems in physical space, the disabilities that had brought us to her in the first place. She was there to see how her game played out.

Its essence was solitude. There was only this endless journeying through the black void into unknown star systems and beyond those into distances never seen before or marked in any way. There was

only the terror. That was what she monitored with her instruments and careful notes.

What to do? It came to me one day as if the idea had been waiting for me to notice it. As I fitted my false left arm with the old, familiar brace, I remembered. As I applied the necessary cream to the burns that traced much of my body, I remembered. As I slipped awkwardly into my chair and drove it out of the building, I knew. The chip she had inserted into my brain had one flaw. It would let me linger in a place as long as I wanted.

I arrived early for the next session and entered into the dream faster than I ever had before. I heard her shout of approval as I did so.

I approached the largest planet first. Its dense clouds moved in the familiar swirling streams below me. This time I stayed, watching. I had nothing to lose anymore but my fear.

After a while I heard the call from the surface of the planet below, a seductive whistling that resonated through me like the vibration of glass. In the next moment my left arm was my own again, blood and muscle and tissue, and my skin was whole. «You have always been perfect," I heard a voice say. «We have anticipated your arrival.»

A vortex emerged, spinning counter–clockwise, and I hovered near it. At the narrow base I saw nothing but the flickering of light, and then a landscape showed itself, filled with life forms, all of them beckoning to me.

I felt the momentum increase as I went down and down and down into the unknown, though I could still hear the voice of Melanie Five.

«Thelonious Dray, wake up! You can't fool me. Your vitals are fine. Wake up, now. Do you understand me? Fear is an excellent instructor. You've done very well. The game is over.»

Yes, I thought. So it is. Now.

I let go completely and followed the vortex all the way down to the surface.

Wattpadder reginac7 is a lover of all things SciFi, particularly B grade movies, and has had many short stories published in her time in various publications. More of her work can be found on her profile.

RobMay Back to the Opera

It was the hottest weekend of the year in London. I was twelve years old and now that school was out, I had a summer of work ahead of me: making a bit of cash by feeding all the cats of Kensington, whose wealthy owners were jetting off to even hotter climes.

Just off Holland Park Road is a row of millionaires' townhouses, and one of those belonged to a man who me and my friends knew simply as the Professor of Rock, because he divided his time between touring with his band and giving lectures on astrophysics. Don't ask me about his music, though, or what his lectures were all about. All I know is that his cat would rather eat my shoelaces than the food I put out for him.

I let myself into the spacious black–and–white–tiled hall. 'Flash,' I called. 'Come on, boy!'

'In here!' said a voice from the study, which nearly gave me a heart attack.

The Professor was at home. When I entered his office, he was lounging in his leather swivel chair, long legs up on his desk. He wore black drainpipe jeans and a black shirt, that contrasted with his mass of curly white hair. He must have been about, I don't know, fifty? Sixty? Seventy? Who knows how old old guys are.

'Hi,' I said.

'Hey, Lauren,' he said. 'I was waiting for you. I was wondering if you'd help me run a little errand. I need someone to go somewhere I can't. I don't want to risk getting recognised.'

I shrugged. 'Sure. Where do you want me to go?'

'I want to you go back in time, thirty years, to 1985.'

* * *

We went up five flights of stairs to the attic. I'd never been up here before. There were computers and strange machines everywhere, and what looked like giant loudspeakers that were as tall as I was. Guitars hung from the walls or were propped up in stands. Was this a recording studio, a science lab … or both?

A young guy with black hair and eyeliner was sat at a laptop in the corner. 'That's Adam, my assistant,' the Professor said.

'Hi Adam,' I said.

'Yo,' he replied in an American accent, giving me a casual wave.

The Professor showed me his iPhone. 'Okay,' he said. 'I just tap in the date I'm sending you to here. So, 14th July 1985 …'

‘Wait a minute!’ I said. ‘Are you telling me you built a time machine …out of an iPhone?’

The Professor laughed. ‘Oh, no,’ he said. ‘The app is just the interface. All of the heavy lifting and number–crunching is done online, in the cloud. Now you stand between these two monitors …’

He indicated two of the giant loudspeakers that were facing each other, a metre apart.

‘What do you know about quantum physics, Lauren?’ he asked me.

‘Quantum what?’

‘Well, quantum theory states that if I play a chord on my Red Special here,’—he picked up an electric guitar from one of the stands —’then that chord will also sound in an infinite number of parallel universes. And if I set up a feedback loop like this …’

He strummed the guitar. The fuzzy chord tickled my eardrums and the air around me started to vibrate. ‘Wait!’ I said. ‘You haven’t told me what my errand is yet!’

‘Oh yeah,’ the Professor said. ‘I almost forgot.’ He tossed me a box of chocolates. ‘I want you to go and deliver this to an old friend of mine. But that’s just your cover story; what I really want you to do is to find me an old demo tape that went missing in 1985. It should be labelled ‘Back to the Opera,’ and I’d really like to get my hands on it. It will make a great bonus track next time we reissue a remastered box set.’

I didn’t understand half of what the Professor was saying. ‘What’s a demo tape?’ I tried to ask, but although my lips were moving, no sound seemed to come out. My whole body was wobbling like jelly on a plate.

‘Don’t be more than a couple of hours,’ the Professor said. ‘I have to keep playing my guitar in order to keep the way back open for you. Turn the gain up, Adam!’

And with that, his fingers blurred on the strings of the guitar. Adam pressed a button on his laptop, and the world of 2015 vanished.

* * *

I was still in the attic, but it was dark and empty now. It might have been my imagination, but I could still hear the Professor’s guitar notes hanging in the air all around me, the only link to the world I had left behind. I had to feel around for the door to the landing, and then quietly sneak outside: the house seemed different, and evidently belonged to someone else in 1985.

Outside, though, nothing had changed. The white terraces of

Kensington still looked the same. Were the road signs different? I dunno-I never paid them much attention in 2015. The cars were the same mix of BMW's and Mercs, although the designs were squarer and less sleek. A guy in faded blue jeans and a white Live Aid T shirt was strolling past, listening to music on oversized headphones with orange ear pads. The wire led to a big chunky box that was clipped to his belt. That settled it: this was the past alright! They probably didn't even have computers here, let alone the internet!

I pulled out my phone and dialed home, just to see what would happen. No signal. Boring! I guess I could duck into a newsagents and check the date on the papers, or something, but then I remembered I was on the clock. I had to get back before the Professor's fingers tired out, otherwise I'd get stuck here and wind up becoming my own mother or something crazy like that. I looked at the box of chocs I held: there was an address on the tag: Garden Lodge, Logan Place.

I knew where that was! Logan Place is a small residential street off Earl's Court Road. I was there in ten minutes. Garden Lodge was a massive Georgian mansion surrounded by a tall brick wall. I must have walked past it many times in the past-I mean in the future–but something looked different about it this time. I didn't have to knock, because as I approached a dark–haired man with a thick moustache came out of the gate.

'Are you …' I said, looking at the tag again, 'the Wizard?'

The man laughed. 'No, I'm the Wizard's hairdresser.' He sized me up and down as if assessing my threat level, and then nodded to the gate. 'He's inside. Close the gate behind you.'

The gardens were beautifully manicured. Inside, the house was stylishly furnished with gilded sofas, exotic rugs and expensive paintings. I followed the sound of a man singing, and wound up in a large room with a crystal chandelier. It might once had been a dining room, but it now housed the biggest piano I had ever seen.

The man at the piano was also dark–haired and moustached. He looked tough, like he should be in a biker gang or something. Yet, he was wearing a yellow vest and white shorts and was pushing the piano pedals with bare feet. The melody was light, and his voice was a rich, and operatic. There were cats sitting all around listening to him play.

'Oooh, la de da … music can't save me … think I'm going ga ga. If you don't come back to me, la de da … then I'll go … I'll go … la la la …'

He spotted me and stopped playing.

'Well, hello there,' he said. 'What do you think the next line should be?'

I suddenly felt the weight of fate crushing down on me, and my

lips moved silently for a few seconds before I managed to squeak: 'I'll go back to the opera?'

He flashed me a toothy grin. 'I like it. I like you. Where did you suddenly appear from?'

The future! I wanted to say. 'Your hairdresser let me in,' I actually said.

'Oh did he now?' the Wizard said. 'Well, I will deal with him later. What have you brought me? Chocolates but no flowers? Really, darling!'

Did he just call me darling? I handed over the chocs. 'The Professor sent them.'

'I don't know any professors,' he said, flipping the lid. 'Well, how sweet: one for every month of the year.' He popped one in his mouth. 'Would you like August?'

'No thanks,' I said, wanting to avoid some horrible time paradox that interfering with the gift might bring about. 'What you doing?' I said, looking for a reason to stick around.

'Oh, just lazing on a Sunday afternoon,' he said. He pressed a button on a chunky machine and took out a clear plastic rectangle with a reel of tape inside. The demo tape!

He labelled the tape with a marker pen and tossed it on a nearby chaise longue. 'Well, it's hard work composing a number one hit. You know what we need? Cigarettes and champagne! Do you want some?'

'I'm twelve!' I told him.

'Oh. Well, maybe just a cigarette then. They're low tar!'

The phone rang, and the Wizard moved across the room and caught the receiver just as one of his cats knocked it off. It was big chunky phone with a cord! 'Bob!' he said to whoever had called. 'No, no, no, my dear–it was my pleasure. Who can resist Wembley? Too loud? Well, it was nothing to do with me! Who complained? Bono! Well, tell that jumped–up little diva …'

While this went on, I edged over to the chaise longue to try and get my hands on the precious demo tape. But the moment I was in arm's reach, a massive tortoiseshell cat jumped up and sat on the tape.

The Wizard wound up his call and came over to find me sat next to the cat, stroking it while trying to slip my hand under its massive butt. 'Meet Delilah,' he said. 'Delilah, meet …'

'Lauren,' I said.

'Do you like cats, Lauren?' the Wizard asked.

'I love them!' I said, honestly.

'Oh, so do I,' he said. 'I think I love them more than people some days. So long as I have cats and music in my old age, I think I'll be happy. Of course, a big house like this helps, but happiness is all that's really important.' He went over to a rack of vinyl. 'What music do you

like?'

'Um …' I said, trying to think of a band or artist we both might have heard of. 'I quite like Madonna.'

The Wizard gave a haughty sniff. 'Well, she has some spunk, I dare say, but if she thinks she's the queen of pop then she really has another thing coming.' He went and placed a plastic disc on a turntable and dropped the needle. 'I love rock, I love pop, but I really love opera, and this woman is opera royalty. Montserrat Caballé-I would absolutely kill to meet and work with her one day.'

A hiss, a crackle, and then an epic noise filled every inch of the large room.

And while we listened, I managed to squeeze my hand under Delilah's rump, and pull out the demo tape. It was slightly damp.

The Wizard came over to sit with me. He immediately sprang up again, though. 'Delilah!' he screamed. 'You make me mad when you pee all over my Chippendale suite!'

* * *

I spent the best hour of my life listening to records and playing with the eight or nine cats that wandered in and out of the room. I even tried my first smoke (yuk) and took a sip of the Wizard's drink (yum). My parents would have killed me, but I never felt in any kind of danger. The Wizard was as harmless as a pussycat himself, and when I realised that I had to get going, he looked almost sad.

'Come back anytime,' he said. 'We must listen to the whole of The Magic Flute!'

I promised that I would, though what he would make of me turning up on his doorstep in 2015 was anyone's guess.

I ran back to the Professor's house, entered by the back door and bounded up the stairs to the attic. Someone shouted after me, but I didn't stop. I could hear the guitar notes hanging in the air, still, and they started playing faster and faster as if sensing my presence. The world shimmered again, and suddenly I was back in 2015.

The Professor put down his guitar in relief and flexed his fingers. He flipped down the lid on his laptop; Adam, his assistant, was nowhere to be seen.

I pulled the demo tape out of my pocket. 'Mission accomplished!' I said. 'I hope it still plays though–the cat peed on it.'

The professor smiled and shook his head. 'It was the cat pee that destroyed it first time around. You didn't get to it in time.'

I suddenly got all excited. 'Well, send me back! I can try again. I know what to do this time! I can get to the tape before Delilah—'

‘No need, no need,’ the Professor said. ‘The tape wasn’t the main reason I sent you back, anyway.’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

‘The chocolates,’ he said. ‘I will send you back to Garden Lodge again, but next time it will be to 1986 with another box, and then maybe for another couple of years after that … You see, the chocs were heavily dosed with very powerful antiretrovirals–the latest drugs that stop viruses replicating inside the body. I’ve invested most of my money over the last twenty years in medicinal research and development.’

I suddenly remembered what was different about Garden Lodge. When I had used to walk past it, there had been graffiti and often flowers left against the wall … like tributes. ‘Was the Wizard ill?’ I asked.

The Professor shrugged. ‘No, never. You see, with the right treatment, a person with HIV can live a normal, long and healthy life …’

The doorbell rang downstairs, followed by the sound of eager footsteps coming up. The person bouncing up the stairs was humming to himself as he came. I turned round and came face to face with a man in a tracksuit. He was bald, but had a bushy grey moustache and a big grin.

‘Hey, Fred,’ the Professor said.

‘Afternoon, Bri,’ the man said. ‘I’ve just come up with the most perfect middle eight for Back to the Opera, so I just had to run right over and—’

He noticed me gawping at him. ‘Well, hello,’ he said. ‘You look kind of familiar from somewhere. Like someone I used to know back in the good old days.’

‘Oh,’ I croaked. ‘Um, well must be just a coincidence, I guess.’

‘Coincidence?’ the Wizard said. ‘Oh, I don’t think so.’

He winked at me. ‘It’s a kind of magic, darling!’

Rob May is a fantasy/sci–fi fan and writer, and one of Wattpad's Featured writers. His current big project is the Kal Moonheart series—a fantasy saga of about twenty books, following the life of Kalina Moonheart–adventurer, card shark and sword for hire. He's currently writing and posting the third book, Sirensbane, right now on his profile. Well worth a look.

Sauthca The Box on the Beach

It was one of those late autumn days at Southport where the sun is low in the south, grey clouds are in the west and the wind is high, blowing a layer of sand particles so that when you're tramping along the high tide line, you seem to be running in a buff coloured dream of relativity.

The sea to my right was shallow, and great creamy fans of foam made patterns on the shiny wet sand.

I revelled in the huge sky, the brilliance of the sun and the smell of the sea.

Bright as it was ahead, I briefly saw a penetrating vertical spear of blue light hit the sand some mile ahead of me. I waited for the thunder, assuming the flash to be lightning but no sound came. I thought perhaps that the wind buffeting in my ears had deafened me.

I put my head down and settled to a steady tramp into the wind.

Looking up a few minutes later, a glitter of light held my attention, way ahead.

I stopped and the glitter took shape and volume to become a rolling, many sided box apparently blown along the beach by the wind. As it neared me, it became a hypnotic object of beauty, a jewel of azure bright facets, each face picking light from the sun and internally reflecting it to dazzle the eyes and provoke an overwhelming desire to possess such a wonderful artefact.

It was only a foot or so in diameter, and as it was about to pass, I started to run to intercept it. The moment I moved, the object stopped its rolling progress.

As I walked towards it, the jewel, as I perceived it to be, split along the edges of its facets to spread itself in petals on the sand like a flower, and in the centre of the flower was a brilliant electric blue sphere, within which were mesmerising swirling patterns of light and dark.

I was so taken with this transformation that I barely noticed that the object and I were now cocooned in a warm, windless hemisphere of silence. The sand still roiled past the confines of the hemisphere, but soundlessly.

From the central sphere I seemed to hear a voice - not through my ears but within my head.

«Greetings. We wish you no harm but we must have words with you. You do not need to articulate your thoughts but if it helps you, you may so do.»

«I – I», I stammered,«Er Hello, erm, who is we - who are you?»

«This is - or I am, if you prefer to personalise our interaction, an

automated robot probe which we send to all planets threatened by carbon life forms.»

«That doesn't answer the question who are you - the ones who sent you.»

The probe seemed to stop. The patterns in the sphere froze in stasis.

I was once more in a bubble of quiet on the sands of Southport beach.

Then the patterns resumed their hypnotic dance within the sphere.

«I am sorry but I have problems of file compression-I have to exchange information with mother above.»

«Is that where the beings who sent you are?»

«No, she is another, very large automaton.»

«But you called it - her, mother.»

«All the best computers are female.»

«So you're a him?»

«No. I am an it.»

«How's it our defence systems haven't been alerted?»

«We hide behind asteroids and moons. There are always those.»

«But your communications with mother would be detected.»

«We steal bandwidth from your many artificial satellites. There are always those too. Now look, I do not have the time to discuss how we elude your primitive technology. Suffice to say we have and will continue so to do.»

«Oh. Er - so why are you here?»

«We attempt to save planets from so called intelligent, carbon based life forms.»

«It's this 'we' that I don't understand. Is there a life form that created you or initiated this - this mission?»

«No. Not any more. We are self replicating machines that were created by a now extinct carbon life form not unlike you, who realised the flaw in the make up of carbon life forms. Now I do not have much time. Battery charge limits I think you would appreciate.»

«OK - but you must understand I'm completely at a loss to make logic of this - this - whole thing. I can't understand without asking more questions. What can you want of me?»

«A decision.»

«I thought I'd reached a stage in life when I didn't have to make any of those.»

«Rubbish — "

The probe made another one of those stops where I was released from its hold on my mind.

«Sorry - we are not allowed to use opprobrious expressions. A

temporary software failure. We need a decision on a question. Do you want to save your planet from complete destruction of the living environment ?»

The question was so vast in its implications I couldn't wrap my mind around it. Of course in one sense the answer must be - yes. But what was this computer based 'thing' playing at? Was I really dealing with what amounted to a very sophisticated assemblage of printed circuits and an operating system as flawed as Windows Vista.

I asked «What makes you think the planet needs saving?»

«Windmills.»

«Windmills? I thought they were planet friendly?»

«Yes, they are, but by the time you carbon based life forms start building them it is too late. First we see nuclear weapons experiments. It is the warning sign for which we watch. Then it is windmills. You always do the same thing. You get your power from oil and coal, then nuclear and then try to do it with windmills. Well some of you get to make hyperturbines but that's end of planet - or shortly after - shortly in our terms, not yours.»

«Hyperturbines. I've never heard of those?»

«Forget it. I do not have not the time to tell you. You must decide.»

«But if I say yes - or no - what happens?»

«If you want to save the planet you must reduce your population. If six billion of you want to live like the richest ten percent you need five planets of resources. You do not have five planets, only one. Therefore you must eliminate the demand of four fifths of you. Fortunately we have a means of so doing.»

«What's that?»

«We have another machine above which carries a radiation which sterilises and then soon — "

Again one of those pauses when I was released from the direct thrall of the device, but I was now so appalled by what was implied by the words from it, that I trembled.

" — kills four fifths of the population.»

«Which - what - how, is the four fifths chosen?»

«We find that carbon based so called intelligent life forms always have a selfish gene which is carried by four fifths of the population. The radiation system selects these.»

«So you have another machine that can do this to us - above - in orbit is it?»

«It is a Him," the Him was uttered with a deep reverence, and the display in the sphere momentarily stopped its frantic dance.

«So if I say no, what happens?»

«We go on to the next endangered planet. They are all the same.

It is a big universe.»

«I can't make a decision for the other six billion - well-less one of me.»

«We do not have the time to allow a — "

I was released once more. The sun had set - but I had not seen its setting. The hemisphere in which the flower and I were held, was illuminated in soft blue light.

" — democratic decision. Six billion to vote or one organism taken at random - the result will be a matter of indifference to us, and probably the same .»

The patterns in the sphere seemed to draw me in so that they were all around me.

«You must make a decision. You have no alternative. Decide. Decide now.»

«Oh God," I muttered.

«There is no God. Only your projected desire to be a child once more and have your mother to decide for you. Decide. Decide now.»

«Then I have to say no. We'll try somehow to save our planet and ourselves. But not kill eighty percent now. That's inhumane.»

«Very well. You are wrong. But we are built to accept decisions from so called intelligent organic creatures. Goodbye.»

The protective hemisphere evaporated, the flower closed back to a box and a shaft of light sucked it into the clouds, and chill rain fell onto my bald head.

I stumbled back to my hotel, wet through, cold and fearful. Would we, could we - humanity - pull through without creating an intolerable environment? Could the alien cure have worked?

Anyway it was pointless to speculate. Most people would be likely to think I'd made it all up.

Originally written for one of the contests on the Science Fiction profile, this short is included by kind permission of Wattpadder sauthca, who has other great stories on their profile.

SecondGuess- Ormons

A choked gurgle of blood bubbled from the back of Lennon's throat. Metallic, tangy and sweet like Ormons, the blood invaded his mouth in a wave. Lennon buckled to his knees, spat it out and heaved. There was a sour aftertaste in his mouth. The knife in his stomach was twisted to the left. It tore through his skin and left him quivering in pain. His knees had scraped against the Projector Glass floor covered by shameless self–advertising Gorgon Inc. stamps and stung. The agony only intensified with every brush of the merciless wind across his bleeding wounds.

The Soldier grunted. «Get back in your cell.»

As if electrocuted by an Electric Current Projector, Lennon's hand twitched in annoyance. He would very much like to. The nurses were stationed there, silent and prepared to stitch him up from yet another critical injury before sending him off to be tortured again. But the knife was still lodged deep in his flesh. The walls of his stomach could feel its edge; cold as ice, sharp and lethal to touch.

Lennon opened his mouth. Lennon closed his mouth. Lennon was a mute and fish out of water for the moment it took him to overcome the immense pain, and stab an irritant finger towards the knife. He gestured for the soldier to remove the weapon, in a perverse game of charades.

The prize of victory was his continued survival. The price of loss was his life. Thus it was fortunate that the brutish Soldier had sufficient intelligence to decipher his meaning. The metal slid out, coated in bile. Lennon observed it in pain–shadowed boredom. The blade was smooth, and shone. Uniform and uninteresting, like every other corporate knife of Gorgon Inc.

'The control freaks.' He thought with utmost derision.

The hilt was wrapped by a pale and unmarred hand. Any callouses were absent. 'Another untrained, and lazy idiot then,' Lennon decided. The soldier was a complete oaf, his sole capability being to swing his knife around, in a pathetic attempt to appear intimidating. If the knife was out of the question, Lennon knew he could take him. His odd feminine neck was brittle, long and slim, like a dainty swan. He would be easy to strangle. Or break. Whichever worked fine, he didn't mind the particulars. But the knife was in the savage soldier's grip, eager to spill blood and slice flesh. And his hands were handcuffed in an uncomfortable position behind his grucking back. Escape was impossible.

Lennon missed Lalilah and her Ormons - her hybrid of oranges and lemons. Ah! He wanted to eat her delicious Ormon pies, piping

hot and crunchy; Ormon cookies that smelled heavenly like citrus; healthy Ormon soups – that on second thought, he'd prefer to not come in contact with his sensitive palate.

The Soldier prodded him in the shoulder with his knife. Lennon winced, as the tip dug in like a hungry viper's fang and pierced his skin. A drop of blood formed and winded down his body in a red rivulet. «Oh. Sorry," The Soldier said in an apologetic tone. For a knife created from micro particles in the air that had been crammed into the contours and rammed into shape of a knife, it could cause a fascinating amount of damage.

Lennon sighed, stood, and allowed The Soldier to herd him back into the cage. Lennon and The Soldier passed a familiar corridor of familiar prisoners, sleeping and drugged out of their minds after lunch.

Then they took a right. And Lennon's heartbeat sped up. Right was never, ever, good. Right meant that you were travelling in the direction to the Gorgon III spaceship's back exit. Where death–row convicts were executed, via an impactful kick off board the ship and into space. To drift in dizzying disorientation, until you starved or were shrivelled to a mass of wrinkled skin and dehydrated to death.

Gruck. A silver Coppinium (IIII) door rapidly came into view. It slid open with a 'whoosh.' Darkness seemed to stretch even past the horizon. The gravity projector that attracted his feet to the sweet, sweet, ground deactivated, and he was lifted aloft. Lennon had no time to marvel the miracle of flight, before being flung out the spaceship. The Soldier stepped off after him, and his features morphed into a feminine face.

«Hey.» Lalilah grinned, green eyes sparkling with mischief as she held up a Projector Key Hacker – PKing Hacker, in short. «Sorry bout' the knife.» The strange solid key rippled and jangled between the apexes of her fingers. Lennon squinted and stared at her for a long, hard minute. He beamed, once convinced of the absence of any deceit. She whipped out a Projector Signal Player and adjusted the coordinates. Her fingers were nimble, as they skipped across each control. A moment later, they were spirited away in a flash of dim orange light.

In the supervillains' headquarters deep beneath earth's curmudgeon of a crust, Lennon and Lalilah were having tea after bandaging Lennon's wounds. «Have I told you look beautiful today?» Lennon casually asked. He licked his lips of any Ormon pie crumbs.

Lalilah choked on air, her cheeks tinged red.

«No?» Lennon raised an eyebrow, leaned across the table and kissed her.

A short story by SecondGuess- , originally written for Challenge 1 of the Contests here on the science fiction profile on the theme of escape.

Simplat Cubicle Gray

Bob first suspected he was in a time loop on a Tuesday which was just like any other.

At first he thought it was his company's interior design choice of gray cubicle walls over gray carpeting with slightly less gray (one might even call it beige) tables which was playing tricks with his mind, but after giving it some more thought he came to conclusion that this is most definitely not the first time he had lived through this day.

He decided to talk it over with Ralph over lunch.

But before lunch he had to survive a conference call about the marketing plan. He tried to focus on the conversation. Had he heard this all before? It was a weekly meeting, so of course it all sounded familiar, from the meandering questions, to the vacant answers. But once more he had a feeling that this didn't sound like a meeting he had previously attended, it was the same meeting he had previously attended. When it was his turn to speak he panicked slightly hoping not to break the space time continuum with his new found insight. He must try to give that same answers he would have given without his understanding that he was caught in a loop. He breathed in slowly and in his most steady voice said

«Sounds good»

Bob met Ralph at the entrance to the Cafeteria. Bob was short and stocky while Ralph was tall and rangy and seemed constantly distracted by the smallest things such as the fact that the queue to the Indian food booth snaked a slightly different route than yesterday. Walking side by side they looked to be a corporate parody of Laurel and Hardy, the portrait of stagnated careers.

«A time loop you say» Ralph said as he was separating the tomatoes from his salad.

«yes» Bob responded chewing his Indian daal and rice.

«This would actually explain quite a bit» Ralph summarized.

«Exactly!» Bob concurred

«So you think you've lived through this day not only once but many times.»

«Many many times» Bob agreed.

«And you think this isn't the mindless monotony of the job speaking» Ralph wondered.

«no, no, the mindless monotony had stopped talking to me years ago» Bob said.

«Well this is exciting» Ralph said, his slightly raised voice turning a few heads from the nearby tables.

They chuckled as Bob wondered if the conversation had anywhere left to go.

«So how does this work? — at some point – do you have to reset and start the loop from scratch?» Ralph asked.

«I would imagine» Bob said.

«And you think that happens at the end of the day?»

«I guess so.»

«And then how far back would you go, is the loop only a single day, or do you think you are repeating the same week? The same month? Your whole life?»

«Not sure - wow, you've really thought this through» Bob said

«How about this one – do you think we've had this conversation before»?

Bob put down his fork and looked around

«Yes» he said in a surprisingly serious tone.

Bob thought about it some more and then said

«Anne is going to walk through the door now»

Ralph turned around to see Anne walking in to the cafeteria

«And she will walk over and ask you about the bug report» Bob continued.

Anne walked by them, then abruptly stopped and turned towards them

«Ralph, did you send me the bug report?» she asked ignoring Bob.

«First thing when I get back» Ralph muttered through a mouth full of lettuce.

There was silence after Anne left, with Bob starting to mildly panic and Ralph looking at Bob intently

«Oh my god, do you think this is actually happening?» Bob lowered his voice

«I do» Ralph said quietly

Ralph then pressed his finger to his ear and whispered some words.

Everything stopped, the cafeteria walls disappeared to reveal a large metallic room circling around them.

«Ralph?»Bob asked.

«You're getting better at this» Ralph said.

Bob tried to get up from his chair but was pushed down harshly by two of the people in cafeteria.

«What is this?» Bob asked.

«An experiment of sorts» Ralph answered.

Ralph motioned to Anne who placed a cold metal helmet on Bobs' head.

Bob looked around trying to commit this scene so deep into his memory that nothing could remove it. There was a cold white flash of

light.

Bob sat at his chair admiring the color of the coffee he had made. His calendar indicated that the weekly marketing meeting was about to begin. Not again, he groaned to himself.

Short story originally written for a contest on the SciFi profile by Wattpadder Simplat whose profile is well worth checking out

SWilson4995 Asteriod 433 Eros

I watch them as they shuffle into the station's only barroom. The places where they grew up and the cultures that they were raised in could not be more different, but they all have one thing in common. They all came here to make a living.

They have a hard look in their eyes. They're survivors, pioneers. Hardy people who wear scruffy kerchiefs around their heads, lumberjack coats that fray at the seams and jeans that have long ago molded to the form of their legs. Their faces are creased from hard work in the blaze of sunshine.

These are the lifers: the technicians of the station who take their mandated six month break every three years, and then immediately return from Earth for another three years of work here. They've made their lives here, and range in age from early twenties to late fifties. And I've been sent to Asteroid 433 Eros specifically to be their boss.

We couldn't be more different. Some of them barely finished high school but at thirty years old, I just completed my Doctor of Philosophy in Geological Sciences at the University of British Columbia. Unlike them, I don't want to be here. What I really wanted was to do was become a professor: to publish scientific articles, run a lab and field experiments, and maybe teach a few classes.

But in the past few years, there's been a sudden glut of people with advanced degrees in all fields. Gaining a professorial position, let alone tenure, has become all by impossible. My choice was clear. Either sign up for endless postdocs or take a job with Interplanetary Mining, Incorporated. Now I'm their lead Geotechnical Engineer on the second largest near-Earth object in rotation around the sun.

The site is rich in precious ores needed back on Earth. They're used in the manufacturing of everything from consumer goods to the space shuttle that brought me here. Interplanetary has already finished the first phase of mining consisting of removing the large piles of ore and stones from the asteroid's surface. Now they're ready for phase two: underground mining. And that's why they need me.

When I arrived, I was assigned a crew of mine engineers and monitoring technicians. Their job was to map the mining shafts, cataloging the types of rock and amount and type of ores found within. My job is to oversee their operations. And so I have to maintain professional distance. I can't be a part of their gossip or the ghost stories they like to tell about the asteroid.

Karen, a gruff forty–something woman who serves as my administrative assistant, comes lumbering towards me. I'm sitting at a wobbly table on my own as my subordinates file in. For them, this was

a weekly ritual: bar night. It's only open once a week to curtail the alcoholism that plagued the station in its early days. At least, that's what Karen had told me. There was nothing to do on Eros 433 back then, she said, so most people would spend every one of their off–duty hours in the bar. Since then, Interplanetary added a shiny new gym, a dry lounge with pool and ping pong tables, a library and a movie screening room complete with massage chairs. But every Friday night from quitting time to five a. m., the bar is packed. It's a dimly lit, wood paneled room that shines from the grease of pub food. At the back, there's a long bar with a brass rail. The rest of the room is crowded with broken chairs and crooked tables. There's a dart board on one wall.

She sits down heavily across from me. «You heard?»

«The new arrival? Yeah, I heard.»

«Sure to god we'll miss Aggie, but this one's young and from what I've heard, he's hungry.»

«Guess that's good," I agree in the telegraphic speech that everyone here seems to favor.

«None too hard on the eyes I hear.»

«Okay.»

She smiles at me conspiratorially. «Finally someone for you.»

I inwardly groan as she winks. But I get what she's saying. Ever since I arrived a month ago, I've been isolated. Aggie — a Brazilian man who's real name was Agamemnon and who was the station's IT department, was the only worker on the station who was had the same level of education as me. But he was close to retirement. We didn't have much in common. Add to that the fact that he was constantly solving issues with the AI and data systems, and that I know next to nothing about the workings of computers. Most of the time we'd only exchange a friendly nod of recognition.

But now Aggie was gone for good, back to Earth to enjoy the gobs of money he's accumulated here after working for a couple decades and having nothing to spend it all on. After all, it's not as if there's anything on this rock except the mining station. Now the only person who's not my subordinate at the station hierarchy was Grayson, the station director who is everyone's boss and the corporate representative for Interplanetary. And I don't exactly enjoy talking to him.

She leaves to find her first drink. I fiddle with my glass filled with rum and coke, pretending that I don't see how every one of the mine workers barely notice me on their way to the bar. I watch as the ice cubes slowly melt into the coke, and wonder where I'd be now if I had only stayed on Earth. Two years and eleven months. That's how much longer I'm contractually obliged to stay on this tiny rock spinning

around the sun. Where did I get the guts to just leave my life on Earth and come here? I know the answer all too well. It wasn't guts. It was running away from my problems. I raise the glass to my lips, downing the rest of the drink in a single gulp.

«This seat taken?» As I lower the glass, I see that someone's come over to my table. The first thing I notice about him is that he's smiling — a sideways smile that is immediately disarming. The second thing I realize is that, like everyone here, he has an accent. But I can't place it.

I shake my head and gesture to the empty seat across from me. I don't recognize him from the station. «You must be the new guy," I say.

He places his pint of ale down on the table and another rum and coke in front of me. «Is it that obvious?»

«Other than being a new face, no one else would dare approach me like this. Afraid to get a bad evaluation, I think.»

«Even if you were my boss, I couldn't just let you drink alone, could I?»

I find out that his name is Stephan Lavoie and that he grew up outside Paris, in some little town that no one's ever heard of.

«And your name?»

No reason for me to act coy when the IT guy is destined to be my only friend. «It's Willow. Willow Mason. And so what brings you here?» I ask the inevitable question.

«Adventure. Stay for three years; go back to Earth changed by the experience. Isn't that what everyone wants here?»

«Not everyone. Some people stay their whole lives.»

«But not you, I think?»

I look down into my drink. I'm not sure how much to tell him.

«You didn't come here for the adventure?»

«It was more of a perfect timing thing.»

«What do you mean?»

«Buy me one more drink and I'll tell you?»

I'm true to my word. I tell him the whole story.

Anders and I were over. Long over, only neither of us wanted to admit it. He'd supported me emotionally through school. From the time we were both 18, he'd been there. And I did the same for him, while he went through pre–law and law school. But I'd changed in all that time. He'd changed. And I knew we were headed in different directions.

And then there was the fact that I couldn't find a job on Earth. When I told him I found an off-Earth position, it began the biggest fight that we'd ever had.

«What am I supposed to do?» Anders asked. «While you're up

there in space, what am I supposed to do? Wait for you?»

«You could come with me.»

«And what? Give up my job?» Anders was on track to become a partner at his firm. Everyone knew that law was still an Earth–bound career. If anyone working on a near-Earth asteroid needed a lawyer, they just went back home.

So when they offered me the job, it seemed like the perfect way to end what had already passed its expiry date. But Anders wasn't going to let me go without a fight. Or at least without getting the last word in. We didn't part on good terms.

«Most people would get a haircut, dye their hair, or get a tattoo to mark the end of a relationship," I explain to Stephan. «That's most people's idea of radically marking a break–up. But not me, that wasn't radical enough for me. I had to leave Earth.»

«That's unpleasant.»

«Sorry to bring you down.»

«It's not that. It's just that it makes me feel sad. I'm sorry that's why you're here.»

«No worries. After all, it's not all bad.» I try to put a brave face on it. But then he smiles at me, and suddenly I feel as though I might be right. It's not all bad up here.

* * *

Over the next few months, we start a new habit. Every day at one o'clock p. m., we meet in the stark management lunchroom. At least, 1:00 is what the red LED numbers on wall say. There's not really daytime here, not in the same way as on Earth. The planetoid's rotation around its axis is just over five hours, so that it feels like the sun is forever rising and setting, and then rising and setting again. The near constant glare of them, contrasted against the blackness of space, is irritating during the imposed Earth hours of our workday.

During our lunches together, I find out that Stephan is a computer geek. I also notice that he looks nothing like Anders, who was tall with black hair and long limbs. Stephan, on the other hand, has a compact body with short limbs and stocky muscles. He's got ash blonde hair and small blue eyes that would be called beady on an older man.

One afternoon, while we're lingering over the corporate supplied sandwiches with their limb roast beef, he tells me about his childhood.

«My parents always wanted us to grow up smart, you know?»

«I know what you mean.» I remember the atlases that populated my childhood home. I can still remember pulling them down from the

shelf and finding a quiet corner where I could pour over them for hours.

«They always put puzzles in front of us, always chess for our game. There were three of us kids, and we were supposed to challenge each other to solve harder and harder puzzles.»

«It doesn't sound like much fun.»

«Are you kidding? I loved it. My parents — they were great. They were the ones who made me love puzzles so much. Logic puzzles, word puzzles, math puzzles — anything. Computers, for me, are the ultimate puzzle. I wouldn't be where I was today if it weren't for them. I can't imagine better parents.»

«You think computers are like a puzzle?»

«Definitely. Software engineering is one big word puzzle. Computing programming is a lot like using a language, you know.»

«Really?»

«Yeah. And I always loved learning new languages. Figuring out the internal logic of the system, the new terms.»

«That's…your full of amazing surprises, aren't you?» It's at that moment that I know that there's something between us.

* * *

Later, I'm working in my lab. Day is sliding into what passes into evening here. As I get up from bending over a micro splitter, I realize that my workday should have ended hours ago. Sometimes, I get lost in my work. But it's not like it matters. No one is waiting for me to come home.

I'm a woman alone for the first time since I was 18, and I know that I'm scared shitless of being alone and having to get to know myself as an adult. Whenever I return to my tiny sleeping quarters on the station, the hours seemed stretch out. The place is filled with silence.

And so that night, I don't go back to my place. I go to Stephan's pod–like quarters instead. When he invites me in, we both know what's about to happen. At least, I think we do. It's not until we're sitting next to each other on the couch, my hands in his and his lips on mine, that he pulls away.

«I'm not sure we should do this," he says breathlessly.

«Why not? Did you leave someone on Earth?»

«Sort of.»

«Sort of? Is she waiting for you?» I knew the feeling of leaving someone behind on Earth. But I could only imagine what it would be like to have that person wait for me to return. No one's waiting for my

return after this three–year term.

«I don't know. We didn't exactly leave it on positive or even really…established terms, okay?»

«Okay.» I'm beginning to comprehend that he really doesn't have anyone back on Earth. Not in any way that he can rely on. «Well, I guess I can leave, if that's what you want?» I get up off the couch and back towards the door. He watches me go, a deep sadness pouring from his small eyes. But it's not until I've opened his door and escaped into the hall that he says anything.

«No. Wait.» He comes and takes my hand. «Stay.» He draws me into his quarters, closing the flimsy pocket door behind me.

* * *

It becomes a soothing habit for me. I spend every night at Stephan's quarters and every lunch break in his company. It means that I can ignore the fact that I'm alone. But we never talk about it. One night, I suddenly feel the urge to define what we are to each other.

I'm lying in his arms with only his thin sheet covering us. The round windows of his quarters have their shutters drawn up, and I can see clearly across the dusty, grey wasteland of the Asteroid. We'll never be able to venture out to explore that landscape.

I turn to look at his face. The sunlight coming through the windows falls in a bright semicircle across his features. He's looking up at the ceiling, his eyes half closed.

«Hey, Stephan?» I venture to break the silence. «This is…it's just an asteroid thing, right? You and me, I mean.»

He turns his head towards the window, where there are no clouds to obscure the Milky Way and the cosmos beyond. «Yeah. Sure. If that's what you want.»

«But what do you want?»

He smiles. «I guess we'll always have 433.»

The statement startles me. I prop myself up on an elbow to get a better look at his expression. «Are you a romantic, Stephan?»

He smiles at me. «Who, me? Nah. Never.»

* * *

I push his words from my mind. I don't think about them again until the next day, when I rush into the staff lunchroom at one o'clock and find it empty.

As I eat alone, I'm terrified that he's becoming attached to me. It's not allowed. This is just a fling — just a way to get over Anders while I spend my time on this rock.

Forty–five minutes pass, and he still doesn't appear. My heart sinks and I realize that maybe I needed to define what we are for my sake. Maybe I'm the one who's getting attached.

Just then, Bill enters the room. The miners don't usually eat up here — mostly it's only Stephan and I, since Grayson is always far to busy with work to talk to us. But I'm shaken back to reality by Bill's entrance.

Bill is a middle–aged man with short, dyed–blonde hair. I can tell by his provincial accent that he isn't as educated as Stephan and I, but he's smart enough to work here. This is, after all, where the money is nowadays.

He's handsome and charismatic, with lines around his eyes from working on the sunny surface of the asteroid most of his time. The mineshaft is encapsulated within an air–tight dome, complete with artificial climate and artificial gravity. But the sun always comes blazing through.

«Hey, Will.» He calls me by the nickname that most of the technicians favor. I hate it. It's as if they think of me as their own children, who could be in the same situation as me on an asteroid like 1036 Ganymed. That's what I tell myself. Either way, I'm annoyed every time they call me pet names.

«Hey, Bill. How are you?»

«I've been looking for you everywhere. We found something down there.» I know what he means by down there. It's the slang around here for the mine.

«What?»

«You just have to see for yourself. Meet me in your lab in a few?»

I throw the rest of my lunch in the garbage and rush to the geological lab. It's not like Bill to get worked up. He's usually such a calm guy. So I know this isn't just one of their ghost stories.

A couple minutes later, he saunters into my lab. The place is a mess, with maps and schematics printed onto plastic sheets covering every surface, including my computer keyboard. 3D printed models of the mining shaft are covered with bits of rock and raw metals. But I'm past caring about how my organized chaos appears to other people.

«Good day so far, dear?»

«Be better if I knew what you needed from me.» Usually technicians only came to this part of the site when something had gone wrong. I brace myself for the bad news. As part of my duties here, I'm in charge of my crew's safety.

«It's this.» He hands me a large chunk of rock. It's almost round,

and about the size of a basketball, with striations of nickel and cobalt ore running through it. It looks like millions of other rocks found on the surface of the asteroid and pulled up from its depths.

«Yeah, so?» I take the stone as he hands it to me. I start to turn it over in my hands and he watches silently, as if waiting for something. I look up at him, waiting for an explanation. But just as I do, something catches my eye.

«What is that?»

«That's why I'm here.»

There's a pattern of dots and fine lines that cover one side of the rock completely. The pattern is linear and precise.

«The thing came away from the wall as a chunk," explains Bill. «We found none of it on either side.»

As I look at it, I realize that it is too meticulous, too perfect to be natural. «If I didn't know any better, I'd say it was deliberate.»

Bill shrugs.

«But that's impossible. This asteroid is millions of years old, and we're the first people to ever mine it. No one could have left it there. Are you sure this isn't some sort of prank?»

«No way, Will. I saw come off the mine wall myself. It was there all along.»

«I'll take care of this," I assure him. As he leaves the lab, I realize what to do.

* * *

I walk into Stephan's lab, with its blue glow of multiple computer screens and the constant hum of their exhaust fans.

«Got something for you," I say. He looks up from a computer screen and seems disheartened to see that it's me.

Before I hand the rock over to him, I decide to have it out. «Can't we talk about this?»

«About what?»

«Us. It was so comfortable, so easy. But you didn't come to lunch today. Has something changed?»

«I just…I feel like I've used you somehow, you know?»

I laugh.

«No, really," he continues. «You were getting over someone. You were vulnerable. And I took advantage of that.»

«Well, then, I guess we took advantage of each other, since you were getting over someone as well.»

«I guess.» He sees the rock in my hands. «What's that?»

«Oh, yeah. This is what I came to talk to you about. Look at it.» I

show him the striations. «If I didn't know any better, I'd think it was…»

«A language.»

«What do you think we should do?»

«Give a couple hours to look at it. I'll get back to you.»

* * *

«You really think I'd give him the only copy?» Stephan asks me as we walk back to my lab. «Come on, you know me better than that.»

I'm surprised at him, and raise my eyebrows. He always seems so by the book.

«We should decode it, shouldn't we?» He asks when I say nothing.

The truth is, I'm not sure what we should do. I don't think doing exactly the opposite of what our boss just told us to do is going to help my career.

A few hours after I gave the rock to Stephan, he came back to my lab. «Come on," he called as he passed the door. «We're going to Grayson.»

When we arrive at Grayson's office, Stephan takes over explaining the situation. Grayson looks at us with skepticism. He's not much older than me, maybe 35, with a shock of black hair that reminds me too much of Anders. He never talks with any of us outside work. He barely even leaves his office and quarters.

«Look, I'm not sure what it is, but it seems to mean something, you know?»

Grayson forces a smiles. «Another of the miners' ghost stories, is it?»

«No, but --» Stephan starts.

«Look, Stephan, Willow, I'm glad you brought this to my attention. But don't worry about it. I'll file a report with the company. I just need you to leave this be. Understand?» I nod vigorously, fully prepared to do what he says.

«But it's weird, isn't it?» I ask Stephan. He's the only person on the station I can trust, but when he asks if we can decode it, I hesitate.

«Aren't you curious about what it says?» He asks.

«Sure, but — "

«Well, whether you come to help or not, I'm going to find out.»

* * *

«Damnit, I know this," he says. «I know what this is. This means

something.» It’s two in the morning, and the station is silent. But Stephan and I are still awake. We’re in his lab as he agonizes over the pattern on the rock.

«Maybe the photo’s just not clear enough?» This is my only way to offer support. Everything he’s done is far beyond my skill set.

«Wait,” he says suddenly. I think I got it. It’s numbers.»

«What do you mean?»

«Look, humans have many different languages that express meaning, right?»

«Yeah, so?»

«So some of them use the alphabet, or some other method of writing whether it be pictograms, ideograms or hieroglyphs, right?»

«Sure.»

«But this seems to be conveying meaning with numbers.»

«So what does it say?»

«This part’s a diagram.» He points to a place on the picture. All I see are striations in the rock. There's Earth, there's us, and that's the distance between the two.»

«So what?»

«Hang on a second, the words are coming.» He scribbles numerals into a notebook. «Whoa.» He looks up at me.

«What is it?»

He scrawls something across the page of his notebook. It’s only two words:

Go Back.

S. A. Wilson is an author of science fiction and fantasy stories who has loved writing fiction since she was nine years old. RoboNomics, her first Wattpad novel, is about humans losing jobs to robots. She also has a teen fantasy novel on Wattpad called the Mage's Apprentice. You can check out these stories and more via her profile - swilson4995.

TaranMatharu Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

The Earth is the perfect spaceship. All the oxygen you can breathe, food and water aplenty, not to mention heat from the Sun and human companionship.

All this becomes abundantly clear when you're all alone, millions of miles away from home and your spaceship is falling apart. Specifically, when you've just crashed your ship into the asteroid you've been mining for the past two months, and the windshield's screen is beginning to leak atmosphere faster than the systems can replenish it.

I was lying on my back, both legs probably broken and maybe a few ribs too, staring into the darkness of space in my cockpit and watching the cracks spread like a spiderweb. It was almost like they were mapping out the constellations in the stars. Not that I recognised any, this far from Earth.

I tried to ignore the low hiss of air escaping, though a vivid image of sand slipping through an hourglass came unbidden to mind. I pushed the thought away, and turned my musing to the chances of rescue once again.

Long range comms were down and my weekly check–in with HQ wasn't due until tomorrow. I'd be long dead before anyone noticed I hadn't been in touch. Even if I did manage to buy myself more time, I had missed a check–in two weeks ago and nobody even noticed. It might be months before they noticed something.

Another fissure fractured the glass, giving off a snap not unlike the sound of ice clinking in a whisky glass. I could do with a drink now, that was for sure. The last time I'd been in this much pain, I was giving birth to my first son. Of course, then I'd been in a pink haze of epidurals and pain killers. This was a lot more real.

I flung out my arm and grasped my tablet, my lifeline to the ship's computer. I ignored the flashing red icons that told me which systems were down and tapped through to photos. My son's smiling face, my husband's loving gaze. This was far better than watching my life trickle away. I just had to resist the temptation to see how much atmosphere I had left. Ignorance was bliss.

Suddenly, a notification flashed up, right across my son's face. I went to swipe it away in annoyance, then I saw it.

Can we be of assistance?

I stared at it, my jaw hanging open like a cartoon. I tap it open.

Are you in distress?

The message wasn't on a frequency I recognised. There was nothing out here, this was a static asteroid, no orbit. This quadrant

wasn't even part of a solar system. The only reason I was out here at all was there was a thin vein of valuable minerals near the surface, which couldn't be found anywhere else.

Ship crashed. Screen cracked. Losing atmosphere.

I tapped away with one hand, cursing my clumsy fingers. It wasn't just oxygen I was losing, it was as cold as a crypt in the cockpit and my fingers had gone numb.

Scanning.

My tablet vibrated, and I saw flashes of various interfaces as someone runs through the ships systems, too fast for me to register. Schematics and inventory pages flickered like a TV with bad reception. It lingered for a while on my medical check, running through the injuries that the intelligent space suit I was wearing had detected. I realised suddenly that they shouldn't be able to access this kind of information without the proper permissions. Who were these guys? Military?

We are coming to get you. Screen compromised. Suggest deploying sun shield to maintain integrity. Comply?

The language was so formal. It was as if I was dealing with one of those prototype A. I.'s I had heard so much about. In fact, it wouldn't be too farfetched to think that the military were testing it out here, where no one could interfere. Then again, it might just be standard–operating–procedure–jargon.

Yes.

It was becoming an effort to type. Still, the idea was a good one. The sun shield was a thin tinted glass that slid over the cockpit's screen, to help protect our eyes from the glare of the sun when we flew towards one. Maybe it could seal some of the leaks. Then again, it might make the cracking worse, but what the hell.

Whoever it was must be locked out of actually sending the ship orders. I tapped my way through to the sun shield icon and then watched as it slid over the top. Fresh cracks snapped up under the pressure, but I felt something change in the room, and my ears popped. Despite this, the hiss continued, though it had been reduced to the low hiss of a viper, rather than a blown gasket.

We are coming to get you. Ecosystem improved, but remains compromised. Oxygen low. Critical levels in two minutes. Suggest using Space Walk Suit in compartment B1.

Damn. Why did they have to tell me how long I had left? I stabbed at the tablet. Did they think I hadn't thought of that myself?

Compartment is crushed from impact. Helmet broken. No go.

A short pause. Then:

We are coming to get you.

Great. Well I'll just sit here and enjoy the last two minutes of my

life then. Might as well find out if I have a chance. I can't summon the strength to write much more, so I go with:

ETA?

Silence.

We are coming to get you.

That old chestnut again. Maybe they didn't want to dash my hopes. I flicked back to my pictures, and allow a tear to trickle down my face as I looked at my husband and child one last time. It freezes on my cheek. Not long now.

A bright light flashed, beaming from outside the cockpit. Is this the light at the end of the tunnel? It's dazzling, almost beautiful in its perfect whiteness. I felt hands grasp me, lifting me from the ground, sliding me onto something soft as a cloud.

My legs and chest were on fire. Do you still feel pain in heaven? I saw figures, shifting above me like angels, but the lights are too bright, almost blinding. I closed my eyes as I was lifted again, then moved onto something cold and smooth as metal.

«Thank you," I whispered to them.

I opened my eyes to see my saviours. Black goggled figures looked back, their faces obscured by the gray masks they wore.

No. Not goggles. Not masks. Inky, round eyes, wet and shiny like fish eggs. Long skinny fingers, skittered over me like spiders, poking and prodding. I saw blades held aloft, gleaming instruments of clinical precision. A needle was plunged into my neck, followed by the sudden inability to move my arms or legs. I could barely breathe, but I felt every touch, every twinge of pain. I was paralysed.

One leaned in, its skin as gray and pallid as a corpse's. The mouth is a toothless slit, but I understood its gurgled words, corrupted though they were by the alien tongue that formed them.

We got you.

Taran was born in London in 1990 and found a passion for reading at a very early age. His love for stories developed into a desire to create his own during early adolescence, beginning his first book at 9 years old.

Taran began to write 'Summoner' in November 2013 at the age of 22, taking part in 'Nanowrimo 2013'. Thanks to Wattpad and updating daily, its popularity dramatically increased, reaching over 3 million reads in less than six months. After being featured by NBC News, Taran decided to launch his professional writing career and has never looked back. Feel free to check out his other books by searching TaranMatharu or clicking on the person this chapter is dedicated to. Thanks for reading!

TheLegacyCycle The Astor House of Old Shanghai

He laid the rolled, silk scroll on his hotel bed and took a step back. The wood floor creaked. He looked down at his old, beaten leather boots and thought again about why he liked the Chinese painting. It was the utter loneliness. Yes, that is it.

The cool night winds from the long open window caressed his neck causing him to shiver. He rubbed his arms feeling tired. It had been a long day, and he knew that tomorrow would not be as peaceful as today. A foghorn then sounded into the night. He took a deep breath feeling the faint scent of the sea in the winds. He decided to rest and get ready for bed. But again he desired to look at the painting. Slowly and carefully he unrolled the scroll and positioned it so that its rectangular shape was symmetrical to the borders of the bed. He took another step back and saw clearly why the painting had appealed to him. He felt like that small, dark figure standing at the edge of a long and thin black sandy shore before the magnificent power of crashing waterfall waves. He then stepped toward a circular table by the open window, took a short glass of anise London dry gin on the rocks, and grabbed the arm of a finely sculpted, colonial sofa chair; he pulled the chair closer to the bed, and sat down.

Thoughts and memories began to fill his mind like faint, clattery raindrops hitting an old copper roof. He did not want to think too much, and so he kept distant from those thoughts by observing them. He smiled as he observed while staring at the painting. But soon the smile faded. He thought of her again, and with her came the not too distant events of the day.

* * *

He arrived to Shanghai in the evening, under dark grey clouds, by a steam locomotive from Guangzhou. Dismal and sad were his first two impressions of the bustling city.

He bought the week's issue of the North China Herald at the railway station and then hired a rickshaw man to take him to his hotel. He was unshaven, wearing a dirty, mid–length leather coat of calf suede; a Sinclair club collared shirt, wrinkled canvas field trousers, and muddied mid–calf boots. He knew that his appearance would not be appreciated in the lobby of what many considered to be the best hotel in Shanghai, but he also knew that many western guests

would simply pass him off as another foreigner back in from the «bush».

When he arrived to the hotel he paid his ride, took his leather packsack, and walked up the red, carpeted steps of the main entrance. Two sleek and well–dressed Chinamen smiled, bowed, and opened the two main entrance doors. He bowed his head back to them and entered the lobby quickly able to distinguish between the American, British, French, German, Japanese, and Russian guests who were seated or standing throughout the grand Victorian room in their finest attire while speaking, observing, smoking, reading, or drinking. Many European heads turned to swiftly observe and dismiss him as some lost messenger. As for the Americans in the room, there were only two, and they were too busy drinking their whiskey to pay him much attention.

He approached the check–in desk and requested their best room; it had been too many weeks of sleeping in low–cost, filthy old guesthouses throughout southern China. He believed that he deserved a treat to feel like a gentleman again. The receptionist explained that there was one room left on the 5th floor for 14 pounds. He hadn't spent that kind of money in an entire month. Regardless, he took the room for two nights.

A Chinese servant standing beside the check–in desk offered to take his packsack, but he declined the offer and simply asked where the lift was located. «Up these steps and at the end of the hall," the receptionist replied. He thanked the receptionist, walked up the steps, and approached the liftman that was already opening the lift cage for him. «Fifth floor," he requested as he stepped into the lift.

And as the lift ascended he reviewed the newspaper article on the third page; the article detailed what two sources believed would be the new, foreign policy doctrine of the McKinley administration in regards to its increasingly aggressive approach to China. The article went on to discuss U. S. Secretary of State, John Hay, as the mastermind behind the policy and that perhaps by the end of the year the policy would be officially communicated to European nations. The lift stopped, the liftman opened the lift cage, and he walked out into a long, dark corridor. «To the end of the hall, sir," the liftman said before he closed the cage. He walked to the end of the corridor, turned to his left, and saw the door to his room. Room 502.

He entered and found the room very much to his liking: high ceiling, large windows allowing the grey light of the dreary day to illuminate the bedroom and bathroom, wood flooring, a master bed, and an oak desk against the wall facing a large hanging mirror.

He approached the central window of the bedroom and looked out at a view of the Huangpu River that was filled with the traffic of

both wind and steam powered cargo ships, the Waibaidu Bridge, and the Bund, which was lined with strolling, well–dressed Europeans, various types of horse drawn vehicles, and surprisingly one Benz Patent-Motorwagen that was catching the attention of nearly everyone it passed. He then turned away from the window, dropped his packsack and newspaper on the bed, wound his watch, and decided to take a shower.

After shaving and getting dressed in fresh but wrinkled clothes he decided to take a walk. He took the stairs down to the lobby, exited the hotel, crossed the Waibaidu Bridge, and walked south along the Bund. At Nanking Road he turned right. Now walking west he thought, west is home. Where I belong; it had been eight years since he had been to the land of his birth.

«Excuse me, sir," a young woman began with a sweet, Cantonese accent. «But, we have a gallery on the 8th floor. Would you like to come and see it?»

She was his first tout in Shanghai. He had traveled throughout southeast Asia and had grown bitterly numb to the elaborate stories and lies he had heard day after day from touts in Yangon, Bangkok, Phnom Penh, Saigon, Hue, Ha Noi and countless other citiesand towns. But she was a woman: young, not forceful, and unaware of her seductive powers. So much does she have to learn, he thought remembering his long–ago military training days.

«It's just this way," she said pointing to the revolving entrance door of an old, colonial styled building. «Where are you from?»

Where are you from? How many times had he heard that question in the past seven months? «I'm originally from Chicago.»

The girl gave a quizzical look.

«In the United States.»

She nodded her head with a smile. «Where in the United States is it?»

«Well–"

«Is it near New York?» she interrupted.

«No. God, no. What an awful place. No, Chicago is on the west coast of a large lake called Michigan.»

The girl smiled. It was then that he noticed her pearl earrings. He immediately thought of the women he had known in the seaport city of Valparaiso, Chile. Shaking his head slightly to rid his mind of those memories he looked into her eyes and could see that she still had very little idea of where Chicago was located.

«What kind of gallery?» he asked, changing the subject.

«We have Chinese calligraphy–do you know calligraphy?»

He nodded.

«And we have traditional Chinese paintings–and modern too.»

He loved art. When he was in boarding school he had two very good friends who were artists. He did his best to encourage them. But that was now years ago. It actually feels like decades.

«Please, please come," she asked.

Deciding that it was best to take a break from the stench of horse manure, urine, and rotting waste that littered the street he nodded and said, «Yes, let's go.»

She gave another smile and escorted him into the old building. Inside a small and dark entrance hall, and to their left, she pointed to an open lift expecting him to enter, but he waited for her to enter first. Pleased with his small act of kindness she walked into lift. He then followed.

The gallery was on the third floor and was simply a room that was neither large nor small. Scroll paintings were hanging on all the walls, and upright stacks of oil canvas paintings were on the floor leaning against two of the walls. There was a table in the center of the room that was covered with piles of smaller paintings; beneath the table were stacked green boxes that he assumed were used to pack the scrolls once they were bought and rolled.

«Are you an artist?» he asked.

«Yes, I am–well, I only do calligraphy.»

«Oh, do you have some of your calligraphies here?»

«Yes, just over here.»

She led him to the opposite side of a wall partition in the room. He then saw several hanging calligraphy paintings.

«Can you read any of them?» she asked.

«No, only bits and pieces. Like that kanji–I mean character. That means school, does it not?»

«To study. That is the meaning.»

«School–to study. I was almost right.»

«Yes, perhaps.» She pointed to one of her paintings and explained, «This means plum and this is tea. These two characters give a peaceful sense. This calligraphy is meant to relax. Rest the mind. Do you know what this means?» she asked pointing to a large, single calligraphy that he had never seen before.

«No, I don't know what it means," he said enjoying her sweet voice and small movements.

«It means love.»

«Oh," he said slightly taken aback. He then thought of the Japanese character for great liking, which was far different in appearance than the Chinese character for love. He took a good look at the individual parts that composed the character and said, «That means heart and that means friend.»

«Yes," she said impressed that he could identify the individual

characters that composed the entire character for love.

«But, I don't know that character.»

«It means house or home.»

He wanted to impress her by drawing the Japanese character for great liking and to then explain to her that it was composed of the Japanese characters for woman and child. He rehearsed in his mind what he would say; there is no greater, and more pure a form of love than that between a mother and her child. But he said and did nothing.

«Where did you learn to read characters?» she asked.

«In Chicago, and later in Japan.»

«In Japan?» she said with dislike in her eyes.

«I used to live there.»

«Really?»

«Yes, and while I was there I learned quite a few Japanese characters.»

«Chinese," she said sharply. «The Japanese stole this from us.»

He had nothing to say in reply.

«Over here we have more paintings. These are more traditional," she pointed to four paintings framed on silk scrolls hanging on the wall. «Each one represents one of the four seasons: spring, summer, fall, and winter. In China we often liken the seasons to our lives. Spring is for the child; summer is youth and strength–vitality; fall for settling down, having a family; and winter, for rest in the old age.»

«Interesting.»

«Yes, and here we have another four seasons, but this is more modern. The colors are more vibrant in these paintings.»

«Yes, I like these very much.» He took a long moment to admire the summer painting that was composed of a lively, green color. «How much is this one?»

«The summer one? Well, it is part of a set. I can't sell you only one. For all four it is 1,200 yuan.»

«Oh," he said disappointed.

He then looked to a series of paintings of warriors armed with tightly pulled bows riding on horses. «I like these. Particularly this one.»

«This is by a more famous painter. They are Mongolian riders hunting.»

«How much is this one?»

«400 yuan.»

«Oh," he said, «that isn't so bad.»

«You should buy it. It's meaning is success.»

He instantly thought of his deceased father and decided that he would buy it. But before declaring his decision he decided to continue

looking for he wanted to spend more time with the girl. Then he saw it. It was a painting that was far different from all the others. He took a closer look and saw that the painting was of what appeared to be an enormous, cloudy sky hovering above the tiniest tree at the edge of a thin and bare cliff. It was a sad painting that was full of loneliness. «This is a tree," he said.

«No, it is of a famous Chinese poet. That crashing down above him is a waterfall–from the Yangtze River. He is walking along the edge of a sandy floor. Those tiny curved lines are birds. The poet wrote about the insignificance of himself in all the vast space of the universe. That is why he is so small and insignificant in the painting.»

He was now more drawn to the painting. The story behind it was tragic. But he loved it, this painting of vast nothingness. He took a few steps away from the painting to admire it some more. He then noticed that half of it was in shadow. «Can you move it? I want to see it in the light.»

«Yes," she answered as she grabbed a pole to lift the painting to then place it on a wall with more light.

He looked at the painting now in the light. The light bleached the painting. He could see that the painting's affect on him was enhanced when it was hanging in a dark place.

«Yes, I like it. I like it very much. But it looks better in shadow, not in the light.»

Although he had made up his mind to buy the painting, along with the other for his deceased father, he wasn't prepared to leave the young girl. He quickly fished for questions to ask her and spoke:

«Are you from Shanghai?»

«Inner Mongolia …»

«When did you leave?»

«Three years ago …»

«Which do you like better, Shanghai or Beijing?»

«Shanghai …»

«Do you have brothers and sisters?»

«One younger sister …»

«What kind of paintings–or styles–do you prefer?»

«Impressionism …»

When he finally left the gallery he had bought a total of three paintings. The third was for his future wife, whoever she would be. It was a traditional, Chinese landscape painting with vibrant splashes of pink for the leaves of the cherry trees. Although it could have, the painting did not remind him of Japan in the spring.

And as he took the lift down to the first floor with the girl he felt the urge to ask her out for a drink when she finished work at the gallery. But ultimately he decided against it. He knew that in the

immediate end everything that attracted him to her–her sweet voice, small movements, and smile–would loose their luster and appeal, and that he would find every reason why he did not like, or perhaps, could not stand her.

* * *

There was the painting on his bed. He leaned toward it from the chair; the floorboards creaked again. He took another sip of gin from the short glass in his hand savoring the taste upon his lips and pulled the painting closer toward him. Distant voices called to him. He could hear the men, their screams as gunfire hailed upon them. He gripped his drink. Dark, shadowy images of children clinging to their mothers appeared while cavalry stormed in to crush them. Swords in the gun smoke were raised to the sky reflecting the faint sun, and brought down in swift strokes to cut the innocent down. He clenched his jaw and stared. The darkly lit room began to fade, and to his dark eyes there was only the painting.

* * *

«Sir, would you like to come in and see some paper cuttings?»

«No, no thank you," he said in the bazaar of the Chinese quarter of Shanghai.

She approached him. He was standing on the side of the street. «Where are you from?»

«From Canada," he lied. «Toronto.»

«Oh, yes. I know it. We've had many customers from there. Would you like to come in?»

«No, no. I've already bought a few paintings today.»

«But, these are traditional Chinese paper cuttings–very cheap. For your girlfriend–do you have a girlfriend?»

«No," he blushed as he walked further into the street.

«You should get a Shanghai girl. They are very nice. Very good for you.»

He did not reply. What does she mean I should get a Shanghai girl? Are they for sale too? he thought with a sarcastic grin.

«Why are you smiling?»

«No, nothing.»

«Please, come in. Just looking. You don't have to buy anything.»

«Look, I'm wasting your time. I'm not going to buy anything.»

«Are you waiting for a rickshaw?» she asked finally noticing that

he was standing in the street.

«No, I want to take a picture of this street," he said as he pulled out a folding pocket Kodak camera.

«Oh, go ahead. I wait.»

He looked behind to make sure that no horses or horse drawn vehicles were approaching and then stepped toward the center of the street. He framed the street in a way he found pleasing to his eye, made an adjustment to the lens, took two pictures, and walked back onto the sidewalk.

«Now you can come in.» She took his hand and pulled gently; he enjoyed being touched by her. He looked at her and decided to go into her shop.

«These are all handmade and unique. No two are alike.»

He looked at the many works of paper cuttings that were framed on the walls. There were animals, images of Empress Dowager Cixi, as well as Chinese children in traditional dress. He could see the price tags on the pieces and agreed that the paintings were indeed cheap.

«Do you like this one?»

«Which one?»

«This one. I thought you were looking at this one?»

«Oh, no.»

«Do you know its meaning?»

«No, I don't.» Obviously, he thought.

«It's my favorite one; it was made by my mother. Most of these are hers. This is her shop.»

«Oh," he was now intrigued.

«It is called, Love is like a Bird.»

He looked at the Love is like a Bird paper cuttings and tried to understand how that meaning could be derived from it. All he saw was a young woman with flowers all around her and a white dove flying above her head.

«Do you like it?»

«Yes," he lied again.

«My mother says love is always on our minds. We may try to distract ourselves to not think about it. But in the end the thoughts of love keep coming back to us. Like a bird that we free but soon returns.»

«Oh," he said. He liked the story, in fact he liked it more than the paper cuttings itself.

«Do you want to buy it?»

She then ruined the moment for him. He found his slight attraction to her disappear in an instant. He realized that he was just another sale and decided that the story she had just explained to him was probably false.

«No. I told you that I wasn't going to buy anything.» He began to walk to the door.

«We have many more. You don't need to buy anything for your girlfriend?» she rushed to say.

«I already told you," he began disappointed that she had forgotten what he had previously explained, «I don't have a girlfriend.»

«I know. I didn't mean that. Your friends?» she asked eagerly.

«No," he answered and left.

And as he walked away he thought about the story and agreed that love was always on our minds.

* * *

The painting stared back at him. He looked and found a strong understanding with the old poet in the painting. He knew what it felt like to be completely alone, and to be reminded of it by the vast spaces found in nature: standing in a desert at night or when watching the distant setting sun dip into an unending ocean. He wondered if he would ever marry and how difficult it would be for him to settle into giving up his long–time affair with solitude.

He looked at the vastness of the waterfall that overpowered the poet in the painting. And then he thought again of her. Yes, her; still there, lingering in his mind. She was far from him, perhaps now nestled in her home in London. He didn't know her, not at all; they had only spent a couple of days together in Saigon discussing their travels through the Orient. He now felt that his mind was too old and worn to fantasize and dream about a future with her that would never be. It was then that he knew that for the rest of his journey he would be condemned to think about her. She would haunt him. Yes, she would haunt him until the end. If only there was some way to reach her.

And so he stared at the poet in the painting, sitting alone, in room 502, in the Astor House of old Shanghai.

There was a sudden knock at the door.

He immediately shook his head of his thoughts, «Yes, who is there?» and went to his packsack that was on the floor by the bed, reached into it, and pulled out a loaded Smith & Wesson Model 3 Schofield revolver, which he had modified by attaching an optical gun sight onto the barrel.

«No need for the weapon," the voice on the other side of the door announced.

How the hell does he know I have a gun? he thought concerned

that perhaps the U. S. military police had tracked him down.

«I strongly suggest that you open this door. We do not want to attract too much attention.»

The voice was British. He was relieved for a moment that the man was not American. Regardless, Americans could still be there behind this individual waiting for him to open the door to rush in and grab him.

«And why should I open this door?»

«I know who you are, what you have done, and how soon the military police will be here. Believe me when I tell you this. You have no other option than to listen to what I have to offer you.»

He turned to look out the window to see if he could escape.

«Do not think it. You cannot escape. There are two sharpshooters who have you within their sights so again, open the door. You have ten seconds.»

He checked his revolver to confirm what he already knew, that it was loaded.

«Checking your Schofield will do you no good. Drop the weapon and open the door. Five seconds.»

How does he know? He went to the desk, placed the revolver on it, and approached the door. He cracked the door open and saw a man impeccably dressed but whose face was concealed by the darkness of the hall. He was wearing a white wing tip shirt with a black silk puff tie and pearl tie tack; a red dragon vest with a silver pocket watch chain hanging from its top button; a black swallowtail coat, black pinstriped trousers, and he was holding a black Victorian top hat in his left hand.

«Winters, Nicholas Winters, I presume," he said with a smile and slight bow.

«How do you know my name?»

«May I come in?»

«Is that a questions or a command?»

«I am British, Mr. Winters. Please excuse the oddity of the circumstances, but when I can, I try to be polite and courteous.»

«Are you god damn joking with me?»

«Pardon me, Mr. Winters?»

«You heard what I said.»

«Mr. Winters, believe me when I tell you this, we do not want to attract too much attention. Now I have asked you politely, but if need be I will enter your room by force. I suggest you let me in now.»

Nicholas saw the sudden intensity in the stranger's eyes. He stepped back from the door allowing the gentlemen to step into his room.

Once he had entered into the dim light of the bedroom he turned

to face Nicholas and said, «The name is Kell. And it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.»

Nicholas then noticed that Kell was wearing what appeared to be a mechanical earpiece of tiny gears with a radio antenna the length of a toothpick sticking up from it.

«How do you know my name?»

«There is quite a lot that we know about you, Mr. Winters.»

«We?»

«Yes, 'we,' but I will not explain to you who we are just yet. Time is of the essence, Mr. Winters. So I will make this short," he then placed his Victorian top hat on the bed near the painting. «We have been tracking you since your escape from the MP prison in Manila as a favor to our American counterparts–quite an impressive escape. Our agents caught sight of you while you were in Burma and then again in French Indochina, and although there were a couple of months–here and there–when we lost track of you, for the most part you were predictable. Not a good thing, Mr. Winters, to be predictable.»

Nicholas, uncomfortable, made his way toward the desk where he had placed his revolver.

«Ah ah ah, Mr. Winters. I would not do that if I were you," he smiled as he took out a pair of goggles with dark red tinted lenses from his coat pocket, put them on, rotated the lenses as if trying to focus them on something, and began scanning the room.

«What are you looking for?»

«It is none of your concern for the moment," he walked toward the circular table by the open window and poured anise London dry gin into a clean short glass. He took a moment to smell the aroma of the gin and took a sip while he looked out into the night enjoying the view of the city and its lights. «Naturally, you are here in Shanghai. And naturally you are here at the Astor Hotel," he paused to take another sip. «Your taste for luxury has remained, Mr. Winters. You were born in Chicago–1867, a post-Civil War child; and born into tremendous wealth. Your father profited greatly during the war, didn't he? Umph, well, regardless your parents were killed in the Great Chicago Fire leaving you, as sole heir to their fortune. Their loyal and most trusted manservant, a man by the name of Yao Xi Wang, raised you and placed you, as your father would have wanted, into a New York boarding school. You attended New York University, graduated and then pursued a degree in law for one year but dropped out. In your desire to see the world you joined the U. S. Navy and rapidly rose in rank to then join the Marine Corps in 1891 where your platoon was involved in combat against Chilean nationalist rebels. You were then stationed throughout the Pacific with considerable time spent in Japan before you were deployed to serve in repressing the Filipino

insurrectionists in the aftermath of the Spanish—American War–”

«So what the hell do you want from me?» Nicholas, now very tense, interrupted.

«It is simple, Mr. Winters. The Americans have seized all of your bank accounts in the U. S. and we know of your three accounts in Great Britain. Work for us and gain continued access to your funds. We simply need an insider. Have you heard of the Righteous Fists of Harmony or, in the native tongue, Yìhétuán?»

He shook his head.

«I am disappointed, Mr. Winters.»

«Well, I just arrived this evening,” he said bitterly. «And I do not feel the need to stay on top of currents events, especially events here. I’m just passing through.»

«Nothing could be farther from the truth. You will be intimately involved in the workings of this place.»

«That is only if I accept whatever you are offering.»

«We are not offering, Mr. Winters. You will do what we require of you.»

«Or what?»

«We are,” he paused to take off his goggles and placed them back in his pocket. «We are, at times, compelled to share with our American counterparts sensitive information, Mr. Winters. Your location would be greatly appreciated by the U. S. consulate. And we have two military police officers on stand–by waiting for us to … as you Americans say, give them the okay.»

«Then call them. Have them arrest me. Take my money. Why should I do whatever it is you want me to do?»

«Citizenship, Mr. Winters. You are a man without a country. Great Britain is there, with open arms, waiting to receive you, a lost American soul.»

«The United States is my country, sir.»

Kell began to laugh. «The United States,” he continued laughing, «the United States is your country?» His face then turned gravely serious. «The moment you are discovered your country will hang you. You are a traitor to your nation, Mr. Winters–”

«I am not! I did what was just and right–”

«Murdering members of your company?»

«It was not murder!» he exclaimed. «What was I supposed to do? Stand there and watch the slaughter of innocent men, women, and children?»

«Rebellion is not a pretty thing, Mr. Winters. Of course, you Americans know all about rebellion. Your former nation was founded on it. But your nation is not what it pretends to be any longer. The United States is an empire. You have Cuba, Puerto Rico, Samoa,

Hawaii, and the Philippines.» He took a moment to sit down in the other colonial sofa chair by the round table. When he was comfortable he continued, «Gone are the days of republican idealism, Mr. Winters. The United States is now the perpetrator. How pathetically sad it is to see a nation constantly declaring itself as a defender of the people's right to self–government, when at the same time they are preventing such a right for the Filipino people, the Cuban people, the people of Hawaii, Samoa, et cetera. You know all about that, Mr. Winters, you have seen it for yourself.

«But we are happy to see the U. S. align itself in such a way with the British Empire. It is inevitable, Mr. Winters. There will always be empire.»

«So what the hell does this all have to do with me?»

«How did it feel to see so many innocent men, women, and children butchered by your countrymen?»

«We were at war," he answered with clenched fists.

«You call that war?» he laughed again. «I call it massacre–a murderous slaughter! It has been estimated that in the province of Batangas, from a population of 300,000, that U. S. guns, disease, and famine has killed off a third of the population. So horrible is the killing that I have just learned that members of the 24th Infantry have deserted to join with the Filipino rebels to fight against the country of their birth.»

«Who are you to place judgment on my country? A subject of the British crown lecturing me on the immoralities of the American empire?»

«You are right, Mr. Winters. You are quite right. We have strived to learn our lesson. Violence begets violence. Thus it is in the interest of the crown to steer clear of conflict and war with the people of the lands we are occupying. Lives can be saved, Mr. Winters. And you can help us save those lives here, in this place. Otherwise, history may repeat itself. A case in point, what was it that provoked the Spanish—American War?»

«The destruction of the USS Maine. Two hundred and sixty six navy men died in that explosion.»

«Thus tipping the balance among the American populace, the McKinley administration, and the Congress to finally seek war with Spain. 'Remember the Maine, to hell with Spain!' Was this not one of the many slogans among the American people pressuring their government to seek war? How convenient for the war hawks of your country to have had such an event as the sinking of the USS Maine.»

«What are you getting at?»

«Come here, Mr. Winters," he stood up from the sofa chair with his drink. «Stand with me before this view.»

Nicholas, suspicious, did not move.

«Come, believe me, I do not bite. Come and look at the magnificence of the scene before us.»

Nicholas took a few steps toward the open window.

«There before us is the most magnificent multinational city on this side of the globe. Look how we took a sleepy, little old fishing town and turned it into this glorious site. Just look at the scene before you, Mr. Winters. There is the future of China. Trade with the outside world, advancements in technology, education, the further expansion of rail lines, factories built, jobs created. We can do all of this peacefully. But there are agents out there seeking to destroy that future; all it would take is one, singular event, and war is at hand. Just like the Maine. Lives lost. The innocent killed. Children orphaned.»

Nicholas looked down for a moment as he thought of his childhood.

«In six weeks time," Kell continued, «we will launch for all to see, here in Shanghai, a British prototype rigid airship based on stolen designs from both David Schwarz and Ferdinand Graf von Zeppelin. It is a message to the Germans that we are winning the race for air superiority. But as you can imagine there is great need among our enemies to ensure that the launch ends in failure; and failure, Mr. Winters, of an airship filled with helium means an explosion. I can just see it now, this view of Shanghai at night and the destruction of a British airship crashing down into the Bund killing hundreds of onlookers.

«Who will be blamed? The British will blame the Germans and thus begins our war her. But it is not the Germans that are striving to do this, Mr. Winters. It is the Chinese. We believe that the Righteous and Harmonious Fists are planning to do this, and if they succeed then there will be war. An airship crashing down upon the Bund will end British, German, French, Russian, American, and Japanese lives. European nations and the U. S. will call for war and they will rain down upon the Chinese a hailstorm of gunfire taking everything that they desire: the coalmines, iron mines, land, waterways, et cetera. Tens of thousands of lives will be lost.» Kell paused to take another sip of gin from his glass.

Nicholas contemplated Kell's words as he looked out at the night scene before him. He then took in a deep breath and asked, «And you want me to help you prevent this?»

Kell smiled and turned his head slowly to Nicholas, «Yes, of course, Mr. Winters.»

«And you will provide me with British citizenship and continued access to my funds?»

«British citizenship and access to your accounts I can guarantee–"

«And I want safe passage to London after I complete my mission here," he interrupted.

«London?» Kell asked with a furrowed brow. «London," he whispered as he turned to analyze the Chinese painting on the bed. «Travel may have to wait for there is much to do here. But really, Mr. Winters, what your ambitions are in regards to your future destinations is none of my concern.»

«Fine then, how is it that I can help you prevent this future war?»

«Good, Mr. Winters, good," he said with a sly grin as he placed his glass on the round table. «The Righteous and Harmonious Fists are boxers, but you know the fighting styles of this land as taught to you by your manservant, Yao Xi Wang.»

«That was long ago.»

«You have a sufficient understanding of Mandarin, do you not, Mr. Winters?»

He laughed, «I understand maybe twenty percent of what is said.»

«You are able to read Japanese, and thus, Chinese characters.»

«Yes, but no more than any novice.»

«These are all fine, Mr. Winters. You see we want you to be kidnapped by this secret society and you have already, unwillingly, made contact with one who could bring you to them.»

«Who?» he asked puzzled.

«The girl from the calligraphy gallery. The gallery is a front. She is there to bring in foreigners from the Astor House, gain their friendship, or love, and get whatever information she can regarding their political, military, or economic intent in Shanghai.

«She already believes you to be of very high social standing considering the room you are able to afford at this hotel.»

«She knows which room I am in?»

«Yes, of course, Mr. Winters. This hotel employs so many Chinamen. They observe and report.»

«And you want me to do the same, report from their end?»

«Exactly.»

«And how will I report back?»

«We have the technology that will enable you to communicate with us through Morse code. But, we will get to that later. For now we want you to report back on the obvious: their leaders, their numbers, their locations, their networks, their weapons, and so forth, but we want you to pay particular attention toward this energy source called Chi or Qi that is supposedly being utilized by the master fighters among them. If you ask me it is silly superstition emanating from the imagination of a people feeling the adverse effects of opium. But there is concern that if these Qi masters are able to accomplish what they say they can: super human strength, skin resistant to strong

cuts, bodies resistant to bullets, then their numbers could obviously overwhelm ours. Again, it is foolishness, much akin to the Ghost Dances of the Sioux Indians, but my superiors want to know more. Perhaps if this Qi energy can be harnessed it can be used to power our machines and gone are the days of steam," he quickly scoffed at the idea. «In any case, it is late, Mr. Winters. For now we are watching you and you are safe. Rest for tomorrow there is much to discuss, and much to do.»

He took his Victorian top hat from the bed and made for the door, but before he made his exit, he turned to face Nicholas and said, «Since you are now one of us, Mr. Winters, a shadow man, the name is, Vernon; Vernon George Waldegrave Kell.» He bowed his head and said before he closed the door, «I bid you good night.»

And as Kell made his way down the dark hall toward the lift he smiled at how easy it was to turn Nicholas to their side and whispered, «If he only knew that it was us who destroyed the Maine.»

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He currently teaches American and modern European history, geography, and economics at an international high school. He lives with his wife and son in Barcelona, Spain.

TLDorian Tick Tock

I usually spend the days after the storms searching the beach below the cottage. I'm a bit of a collector, of unusual things. The odder the better. Sharks teeth, ammonites, whale bones, I lovingly retrieve from the surfs fluid tentacles and take home to hang on the walls of my little cottage above the wind swept cliffs. There we can both sit together and admire each other like old lovers recently reunited.

Bleached white rubber ducks, a box of surgeon's instruments, small pieces of scrimshaw with delicate etchings of whaling ships from times gone by cut into their surfaces. I have a place for them all.

A ships figurine carved in the shape of a mermaid, her skin tanned deep brown by the elements stands in my front lawn and judges the occasional passer–by with her beautifully sad face and simmering golden eyes. I don't sell the things I find, that would be rude, they have travelled so far to find me. Why would I when they have been so lovingly crafted by the elements. The tumultuous sea, the ravaging sand, the blanching of the sun can turn something quite ordinary into a thing of uncommon strangeness? I once found ball of ivory ambergris washed up in the foam on the water's edge, the vomit of the whale so prised by perfumers. I still have it, tucked away in the one of the drawers in my bureau.

Sometimes when the storms rage I stand on the beach watching the brooding ocean, my coat flapping angrily around my ankles, listening to the shrieking of gulls lifted high by the winds. Sprays of surf roll off the towering waves, wild horses trying to break free of the surface only to come crashing down in giant plumes of spray and be dragged back kicking frantically into the torrid green depths.

The locals must think me odd but it's what I do. It interests me.

The beach here shelves off deeply. Dulgot's Trench lies but two hundred feet out. Named after the man who first surveyed it, Dulgot lived in my house. He spent his life mapping the trench, working up and down the coast in a weathered old trawler, with nothing but a sounding line in his hand and the voice of the sea whispering in his head. The trench is too deep to dive. We have travelled into the moon, mars, visited inhospitable planets and reached out to touch the distant realms of space but still our oceans evade us.

When he was too old to take a boat out alone he used to walk the beach like me, collecting. The locals left him alone, after all it was his trench. They say he went mad, driven so by the outlandish things he used to collect from the beach and nightmares bought on by the thoughts of what might lurk down there in the trench. He was taken

to the sanatorium over on the moors and buried at the church at St Mawkes amongst the bent trees and wilting flowers. It is a bleak place. I have looked, there is no tombstone for him there but it is a tale as folks around here would have you believe.

Yesterday a storm brewed up from the west and came down upon us like the ancient furies. Torn from their chthonic world they raced along the shore crying vengeance and havoc.

Barely had they left and I'm scouring the foreshore for finds. I pick up an ancient shell from the water's edge, thrown up by the recklessness waters. Oval, black, glassily green, to most it's nothing special but I have an eye for such things. It's deceptively heavy, as I walk back up the beech I spin it in my pocket and test the surface, round and smooth.

At the cottage I check it carefully, it has a small hairline crack in it, the merest chink as I run my fingernail across it. It was not there when I picked it up. Perhaps it's a dragon's egg. The thought makes me chuckle to myself. I caress it for a few moments then lay it on the rug in front of the crackling fire.

I stoke the fire, make some broth and sit and watch my new find. Outside it's getting dark, I dose off in to a fitful sleep crowded with dragons and mermaids.

I wake up with a jolt. The fire glows an infernal heat. He is sitting there on my couch, he has found my tobacco and sucks thoughtfully at my pipe. Smoke grows like ivy in a tangle of wisps and trails about him.

'Ah, you're awake.' He picks up a cephalopod fossil from the table next to him and explores the surface with his glittering eyes. 'This is nice.'

'It's old, very old, washed up from the trench.'

He looks up. 'Not so old. Many things have lain down there longer.'

The pendulum in the grandfather clock in the hallway has stopped moving. I notice the absence of the reassuring rhythmic sound of the movement. The second hand on my Captains clock on the mantelpiece stands suspended, inert. Oblivious to the passing of time.

He follows my eyes and leans forward as if we are to enter a Faustian pact. 'I'm Mr Tick.' His face twists into something odd as if he has made a joke.

Mr Tick has shaggy oiled hair like seaweed I think, he's pale like the moon. He is wearing one of my suits, one I purchased for a funeral of a friend long ago, one who has long since left these strange shores. It's dark and sleek and mirrors its wearer well. My jet cufflinks flash their teeth from under his cuffs. His long white fingers delve into my tobacco pouch and pull out a weft of weed.

He notices the broken shell on the floor and reaches down and throws it into the flames, instantly the fire flares a sodium yellow throwing grotesque shadows across the roughhewn walls of the little room. A fugue of evil smells fills the room, deep and earthy like something left slowly rotting for eons now disturbed. For a moment I feel dizzy, disoriented by the thick fumes.

'Like some?' He hands me my tobacco pouch. His fingers are cold to the touch like they have been held under icy water.

We sit in silence getting the measure of one another. Outside the wind bellows and roars and pounds its fists upon the walls.

'Your home is most…. interesting.' He is unconvincing. He stands and picks up a battered wood voodoo mask and inspects it, his bitter eyes flicking from it to me as he turns it in his chilled fingers. The mask seems to shrink and grow before him as if his touch has bought alive an extinct magic from within it. He drops it with a clatter and moves on, prodding, turning and checking. Like an inquisitive child looking for an entertainment to assuage his boredom.

'I travelled once, when I was young, I collected things. I still do here on the beach by the sea.' I remark. He is holding the plastic duck. He's going to ask what it means but decides not to, replacing it with an air of distain on the table.

Outside the twigs of the branches of the twisted bushes driven to impetuosity by the wind claw upon the surface of the windows. Drawn by their scratching he stands and stares up at the night sky and the stars. 'Did you know that by looking at the light of the stars you are looking back in time. Up there far away is the Andromeda galaxy. We see it as it was two million years ago not as it is now.'

'When humans first walked on the Earth.'

'Exactly,' he swings around. 'Can you imagine what it would take to travel such an infinite distance. Nothing could survive it.'

'Nothing.' I agree.

'Unless of course you had the mastery of time itself. Then such a thing would be possible.'

'Is such a thing possible?'

He ignores my question. 'You have travelled you say? I have travelled too. We were cast like seeds into the solar wind to drift across the vast unknown realms of space, a journey that should last an eternity, gone in an instant. Such are the vagaries of physics.' As if to emphasise his point he quickly strikes his match, the flare lighting up his pockmarked face, 'We arrived as the masters of time on a planet where all things would be beholden to us.'

He blows out his match. His tongue is long and redder than ochre.

'To land at the bottom of the trench is something you cannot have foreseen.' I offer.

'Down in the fathomless depths where the strange things lurk and whirl through the primordial soup their great jaws snapping at the darkness. I have seen perplexing things during my solace down there while I waited. But it was only time,' his voice elevates. 'I have waited a long time or is it no time at all? A conundrum. My friends are waiting for me to get them.'

'It will not be easy, others have tried.'

'Others?' he tilts his head and reflects. 'I'll manage. Your world rests in a timeless sleep. No rush.'

'Is that the time?' I look at the clock, the hands have not moved.

'How it's flown.' Mr Tick smiles and steps toward me his hand outstretched. 'I think your moment has come, hasn't it? I have work to do and your home will suit me while I undertake my labours. I yearn to be with my friends again. You understand.'

'Before you do have you seen this?' I show him the two halves I hold in my palms. They are smooth, lustrous like green jade. Two sides of a stone shell.

He steps back and raises his hand, his face twisting in confusion.

I clap them together in the air. No flashes, no bangs. It's as simple as that.

Mr Tick has gone.

'You can call me Mr Tock', I say to myself. 'I was once Mr Dulgot. And before that something else, I forget now. I open the drawer on my bureau and drop the shell in amongst the others.

I check my fob watch, the one I keep close to my chest. It always runs true, guided by my heart it never misses a beat. I then adjust my clocks and add back the lost five minutes. It always takes five minutes. They like to talk and I don't like to rush them, I don't get much company. My fob watch runs twelve hours, ten minutes ahead of every one else's. It serves as a reminder to me of the number of jade stones I have in my collection.

I sense there's another storm brewing. I should go down to the beach.

After all I am a collector. Of unusual things.

Tick Tock is a short story by TLDorian, and comes from his Stranger Things short story collection.

TLDorian has always been interested in bringing short stories with the feel of old style Sci—Fi to a new audience, particularly stories with a human element and a little twist in the tale.